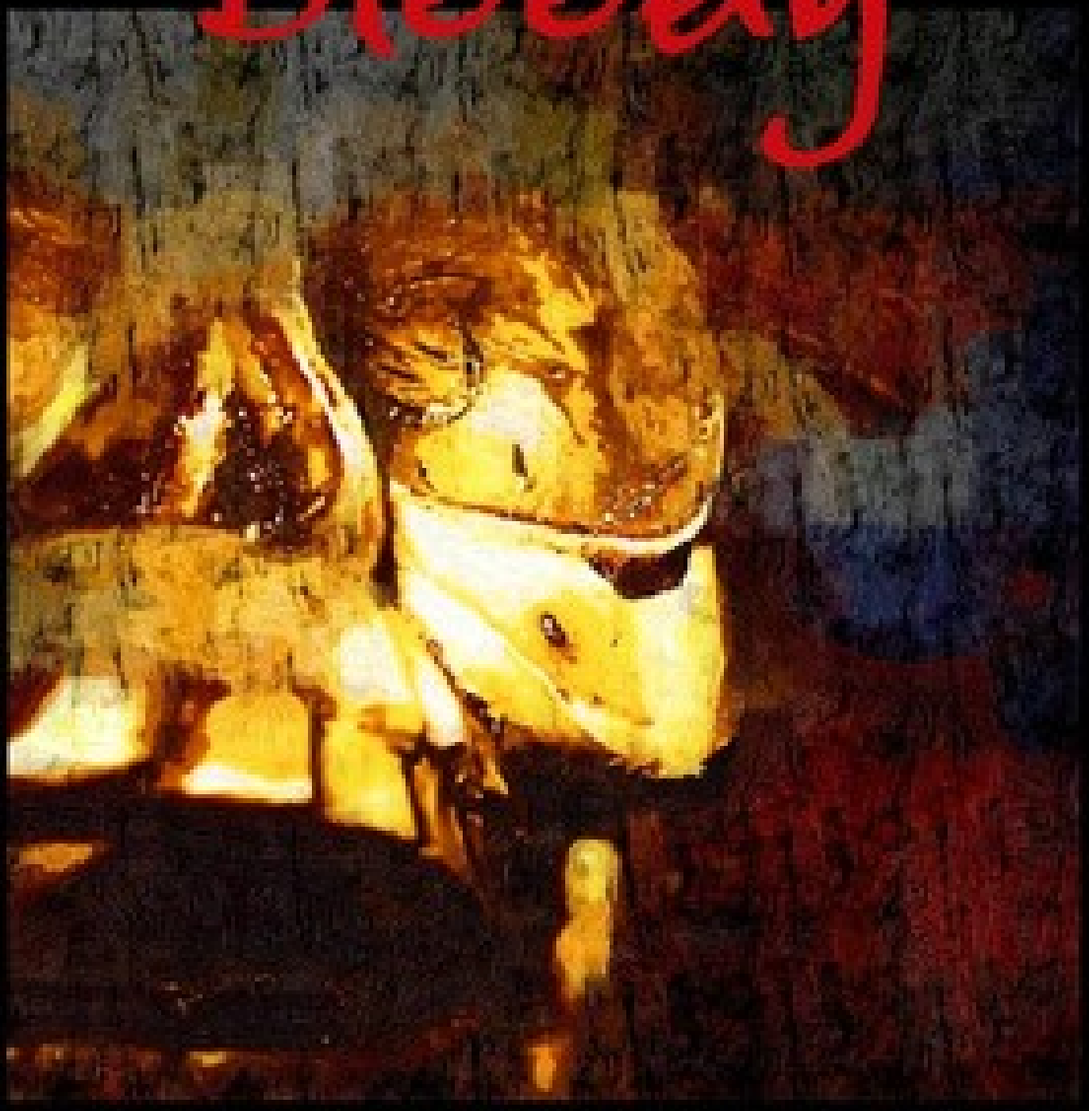
Dark and Bloody



Alonzo Fugate

Dark and Bloody

(Kentucky Tales of Terror)

By Alonzo Fugate

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Dedication

This book is dedicated of course to my lovely wife Lisa. It is also dedicated to my great parents who always encouraged me...and still do!

Most of all though, this book is dedicated to all the people in Kentucky who love a good scary story. Kentucky is a beautiful state...but it can be dark and bloody.

Foreword from the Author

Kentucky has been nicknamed the dark and bloody ground. This name was given to the state because of the many battles that were fought here by the Native American tribes who used it as a hunting ground. Cherokee, Shawnee, and Chickasaw tribes fought and died on this land, soaking it in the blood of war.

When white settlers came to Kentucky, they were warned that they were entering a dark and bloody ground. Sounds sort of ominous…doesn't it? Makes you wonder why people decided to stay in the first place. Imagine you are a settler, looking for a place to live. Would you seriously consider moving to a place that was described as "dark and bloody?" Was the place they were moving from even worse?

Anyway, as a native son of Kentucky, I grew up listening to Appalachian ghost stories and "spook" tales told to me by my grandmother, my parents, and other relatives and friends. When I was younger, it was always a treat to curl up under a blanket on a cold, winter night as my dad told the story about the hairy monster that stole up behind unwary riders and went for a little ride with them. The best stories were the ones that my mom and dad insisted were true because they had experienced them. My dad told a story about seeing a man walking in the snow next to a well. When my dad got near the well, the man was gone…and there were no footprints! That one really gave me nightmares. Of course, I was only seven at the time!

This book that you are reading, Dark and Bloody, is a collection of scary stories cooked up in the twisted mind that resides in my head. Sometimes these stories would rise up inside of me, ready to be written. Often, they would develop as I wrote them. But all of them have one major element that is the same. They are all dark and bloody.

I hope that you enjoy reading them as much as I enjoyed writing them!

January 2010
Alonzo Fugate

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Sugar and Spice...Isn't So Nice

I heard the first cracklings of thunder and my heart started to race.

Perhaps it was because I was all alone in the forest. So green and dark, it seemed to stretch on for an eternity. The dark shadows under the trees twisted themselves into strange creatures that beckoned with long claws.

I sighed deeply and looked down at the map. “Come on Beth. You can do this. How hard can it be to find your way back to camp?”

I stumbled over a log that was lying across the path. At least, I hoped that I was on a path. How could I have gotten lost so quickly?

My heart was still racing. I was panicking, and every guide book that I had read warned against it. Getting lost was bad. Panicking while you were lost was even worse. I forced myself to stop and sit down on the log. It was soft and damp from the morning shower. I could feel moisture soaking into my jean shorts. It seemed as though another storm was on the way, as I heard yet another rumble from above. God, I hoped not.

I took one last, long look at the useless map that I held in my hands. It was hopeless. I had no clue whatsoever as to where I was. I closed my eyes and tried to rethink my way through the day.

It was early summer and my dad had surprised my mom, my younger brother, and me with a surprise camping trip on our way to visit some of his relatives in Kentucky. Now, you have to know my dad. He isn't one for state parks and camp grounds. He is a real back-to-nature type of person who loves to really rough it in the wild outdoors. So, instead of spending the night in a campground, we had all set up a tent in the woods. It was a little creepy, camping with nobody else around for miles, but my dad had made it a lot of fun, joking and telling stories until late in the night.

This morning I had woken up early and decided to take a short hike into the woods. It had been so calm and peaceful. Everything was so fresh after a quick morning shower. Even the air smelled sweet. I hadn't wanted to wake up my parents or my pesky brother, Jake, so I had quickly grabbed a map of the area and slipped out of camp. I hadn't intended on going very far.

Then I had seen the bird. It was the bluest bird that I had ever seen in my life, and it was just sitting there, in the lowest branches of a willow tree right in front of me. It was so close that I had felt like I could just reach out and touch it. I had held my breath and had slowly stretched out my hand.

Suddenly, the bird had given a sharp chirp that sliced through the morning silence. With a flash of blue, it had taken off. I had thought that it was gone for good, but then I had heard a sweet chirping and had looked up. There, not 10 feet away, had been the blue bird. Mesmerized, I followed it deeper and deeper into

the forest. I don't know how long I had walked when I suddenly realized that I was lost.

So now, here I sat, my shorts getting soggier by the moment. I could feel hot tears start to burn my eyes, and I quickly brushed them away. I was not going to let myself cry. My dad would say that was being such a girl. *So what?* I thought to myself, *I AM a girl!* But still I brushed the tears away. Crying wouldn't do much good now anyway.

I sat for a few minutes, looking around. The forest didn't seem so inviting anymore. A large plop of water dripped from one of the leaves overhead and hit me on the nose. One thing that I did know was that I wasn't going to keep on stumbling blindly through the trees.

"Help!"

My voice echoed through the slender, jumbled branches. Of course, there was no reply. I didn't even hear an echo.

I took a deep breath and called out again. Nothing. My heart started to race again. This wasn't good at all.

I remembered another time that I had been lost, 5 years before. I had been seven at the time.

My mom had taken me shopping at the mall. It was right before the start of school, and all of the stores were having great back-to-school sales. My mom had wanted to buy me some new shoes, but I had had other things in mind. I had been dying to get my hands on a Write n' Wash Bear just like my best friend Courtney had gotten for her birthday.

It wasn't much of a toy. It was really just a plain old teddy bear made of cotton that you could write on with special markers. When you were done, you could throw it in the wash and it would come out good as

new, ready to be marked on again. But I had been seven, and I had wanted one.

I had stood patiently while my mom made me try on every pair of shoes in Sears. Well, it had seemed like it anyway. After buying me a pair of pink and white walking shoes, she had decided to stroll over and look at some purses. My mom was a purse freak! She had at least fifty purses stuffed in her closet.

While she was busy looking over the latest purses, I had taken my chance and slipped away. I had thought that I had known exactly where to go. Of course, being seven, I really hadn't had any idea which way to go.

Wandering in the sea of people moving and shoving all around me, I had quickly become lost. I had been so scared. I had started to cry. I had finally panicked and had started to scream. Luckily, a screaming seven year old isn't something to be ignored. My mom had been looking for me and had come running. She had grabbed me by the arm and had practically dragged me from the store. Although I had still been sniffling when we had gotten home, I had never felt so safe and calm as when my mom had come to my rescue.

Nobody's coming to your rescue now, I thought to myself, as I stared around me, trying to see something that looked familiar.

Suddenly, I did *hear* something familiar. A low chirping sound came from overhead. I looked up and saw the blue bird sitting above me.

"You again," I said, as the bird continued its song, "You got me into this mess. I wish you could get me out of here!"

Like it could understand me, the bird flew down to a low bush a few feet away and started to sing again.

Had it understood me? Impossible…but I was desperate.

"I must be crazy," I said to myself as I stood up and made my way toward the bush.

As I got closer, the bird took off and flew about 12 more feet before it landed on some low hanging branches. It looked at me with it shiny little eyes. *Hurry up!* they seemed to plead.

Was I crazy? Here I was, lost in the forest because I had been silly enough to follow a bird. Yet still, I followed that same bird. Or was it even the same bird? It looked like it, but it could have been any blue bird. Did I know what I was doing?

No. I didn't. But I really didn't have much of a choice at the moment. I had read somewhere that birds fly around in the same general area looking for food or nesting material. If this was the same bird that I had followed into the forest, perhaps it would be returning to the same spots and would lead me back to camp. So, I kept following the bird as it continued to stay a few feet ahead of me the entire time.

The bird never once went out of sight. It kept stopping and looking back at me, waiting for me. I know that it sounds unusual now, but at the time, I was so grateful for anything to follow.

Suddenly, the threat of the storm overhead crashed down upon me. At first, it was just a drop or two coming through the leaves. As it began to rain harder, the drops started to fall even faster. I was starting to get really wet. Another crash of thunder, louder than it had been so far, made me jump and scream. I needed to get to some sort of shelter.

I was afraid that the bird would become frightened of the storm and fly away. However, it still stayed just ahead of me. It looked back, chirped twice,

and disappeared under some dark, looming trees. I ran, trying to catch up.

As I walked underneath these large trees, I noticed that the ground became drier. The leaves of the trees were very thick in this part of the forest. They were so thick that they blocked the rain from getting in.

It was darker in this part of the forest as well. I stood there for a minute, letting my eyes adjust to the gloom. I was just happy to be out of the rain. It crossed my mind that I surely hadn't been this way this morning. I would have remembered these large trees. They were enormous!

Up ahead, the bird was actually sitting on the ground! Its little feet hopped and bounced a few feet and then it flew up into the branches and vanished.

"No!" I cried out, running toward the tree where it had gone. I couldn't lose sight of it now!

I scanned the limbs, but I didn't see it anywhere. I could feel the hot tears starting to burn at my eyes again. My heart was pounding in my ears, and I felt sick to my stomach. Now I was really lost! Why had I followed that stupid bird?

Try to look at the bright side. At least you're out of the rain! I thought to myself, once again brushing away the tears. I swallowed down the lump that had formed in the back of my throat and looked around.

"Hey!"

I let out a little cry when I looked deeper into the gloomy darkness under the large cluster of trees. There was something up ahead! My heart started to pound with excitement as I slowly took a few steps deeper into the forest.

It was a house.

I stood staring at the house for a few minutes. I couldn't believe my good luck! Now I could get to a telephone or at least to some people.

"Hey!" I cried out, running toward the house, "Help! I'm lost! I need help!"

As I got closer to the house, I slowed down. It became obvious to me that the house was abandoned. Nobody lived here, and from the deserted look of things, they hadn't lived here in quite some time.

It was a strange little house. The more that I looked at it, I realized that it wasn't like any other house that I had ever seen. For one thing, it was so small. It couldn't be much more than two rooms. Also, it had a round, sloped shape to it like it was melting. The whole house looked tired. How old was it?

I walked up to the little dark brown door and knocked.

"Oh!"

I cried out as my hand sunk right through the door. This house really was old! The wood was so rotten that it was practically falling apart. Carefully, I pushed on the door. I didn't want the whole thing crashing down on my head.

Slowly, with a rusty creak, the door swung open. A blast of ancient air hit me in the face. The house had an odd smell, like herbs or spices. I couldn't quite place it. It was sort of familiar though. Where had I smelled that smell before?

"Hello?" I called out, knowing that there couldn't possibly be anyone living in this old, strange house. Still, I didn't want to just walk into someone's house.

When I didn't hear an answer, I took a small step. Everything in the house looked like it was on a slant. I looked to my left and tried to peer out the window, but it was covered with some white moldy powder. I

thought about wiping it off and then remembered what had happened when I had knocked on the door. *You don't want to knock out a window, now do you?*

The spice smell was even stronger inside the house. I suddenly felt a little dizzy. What kind of smell was that? It seemed so familiar to me.

I had been wrong. The house was just one room. The floor was dirt, and I was glad for that. I could imagine my feet sinking down into some soft, rotten wood from long ago. The entire place was probably full of termites and other bugs. I quickly glanced down at my hand. It had some brown pieces of rotten wood stuck to it, but I didn't see any bugs. Thank goodness!

Along the left side of the room was an old bed frame. It was made of some sturdy branches tied together with some old rope that looked like it was going to fly apart at any minute. At one time, this frame might have held a mattress of some kind, but it had either been carried away or had rotted away long ago.

At the far end of the room was a small fireplace. It appeared to be made of some type of shiny black stone that I couldn't make out. There hadn't been a fire made there in a long time. Now, there were just a few scattered leaves that were probably the home to some mice...or a snake!

In the center of the room, there was a long, dark table. I walked up to it. It was rectangular with sharp corners. In fact, it was the only thing in the room that had sharp corners. It looked out of place. Everything else about the house looked old and abandoned. But this table looked almost brand new. Its dark wood gleamed, even in the dark gloom of the room.

"Weird" I whispered to myself, reaching out a hand to stroke the dark, shiny wood of the table. It was

solid, but it felt slightly sticky to the touch. I wondered what kind of wood it was.

Wham!

I let out a scream as the door slammed shut behind me. I whirled around and ran back to it. I pushed against it, expecting my hand to go right through the soft, rotten wood. Surprisingly, the door was very hard on this side. I scraped my fingers against it.

"Ouch!" I yelped, pulling back my sore knuckles.

I grabbed at the handle. I pushed and pulled. It was no use. I was locked in!

At first, I thought that I was just being silly. Surely I couldn't be trapped inside an old house that was practically falling down. I could probably just break through one of the walls! I laughed to myself and turned back around.

"No!" I let out a scream!

Someone was standing in the back corner of the room, staring at me! My hands flew over my mouth as I started to scream again. There was someone standing at the back of the room. They were just standing there, watching me!

As my heart continued to race, I saw that they had also put their hands over their mouth. Wait a minute…

It was a mirror!

I let out a sharp snort of laughter as I realized that I had just scared myself with my own reflection. I took a deep breath of the spicy, stale air and walked past the shiny dark table to the old mirror that stood in the back of the room next to the fireplace. I hadn't noticed it earlier, and yet, here it stood. Abandoned by someone long ago, it stood like a silent guard in this old, deserted house.

It was fairly large with an oval shape. Covered in layers of dust, it still was clean enough to show a reflection of a damp, tired twelve year old girl standing in the middle of a leaning old house in the middle of the forest. There were dark streaks down my cheeks where I had thrown my hands over my face. It was that rotten wood! I quickly brushed my cheeks off with my clean hand.

I reached out carefully to brush the dust off of the mirror. Like the table, it had a slightly sticky feel to it. With the dust brushed away, it looked surprisingly good. There was a decorative border of flowers and birds that ran around the outside edge of the mirror. They looked like they were made of the same dark wood as the table. Why would someone leave something so beautiful out here in the middle of nowhere? I slowly traced one finger over the delicate wood carvings. They were so beautiful.

Just then I heard a familiar chirping sound coming from beside me. I turned and saw the blue bird sitting in the leaves that filled the bottom of the fireplace. Its tiny eyes seemed to smile at me. It chirped one more time for good measure and then flew up into the chimney.

"Hey there!" I said, dashing over to the fireplace.

I knelt down and stuck my head into the hearth so that I could see up into the chimney. The stale spicy smell was stronger here, and I could feel my nostrils burning from the scent. I peered up into the dark chimney.

Above me, I could see light from the opening at the top. I could also faintly see why the blue bird had led me to this place. It was standing on a collection of twigs and grasses. This had to be its nest! It ruffled its feathers, gave me one last chirp, and flew out the top of

the chimney. For a second, I felt like rushing out of the house and following it, but then I realized that I would probably just get lost again. Besides, at least I was dry here. I didn't want to go back out into the rain.

I was just about ready to turn back and take another look at the mirror when I noticed something brown hanging right above my face inside the chimney. My curiosity raised, I twisted around so that I could get a better look.

There was a stone missing. Someone had taken it out, leaving a little hollow space behind. Apparently this was used as some sort of hiding place because a small brown bag had been carefully pushed into it. I would never have noticed it if I hadn't been staring at the bird's nest! Only a little bit of the bag had been hanging out of the hiding place, and the color almost matched the darkness of the house perfectly.

With trembling fingers, I carefully lifted the bag out of the chimney and scooted back some so that I could see better. The bag was rather heavy. There was definitely something inside! I wondered what it could be.

Maybe it was money. It could be gold. Perhaps it was jewels. My mind started to race at the thought of bringing back a bag of riches to my parents. We would be set for life! Then I took another look around at my modest surroundings. I realized that whoever had lived here probably didn't store money, gold, or jewels in the fireplace. They couldn't even afford to have a real floor!

What could be inside? The bag appeared to be made of brown leather. It was soft to the touch and had a worn look as though it had been handled many times. The top of the bag was fastened with a leather tie. I carefully undid the knot and opened the bag.

Instantly the strong spicy smell became even stronger and more intense. I grimaced slightly as the smell, although not unpleasant, assaulted my nose. I held my breath and opened the top of the bag wide so that I could see down inside.

I was surprised to see that the bag contained some brown powder. I reached down inside and sifted it with my fingers. The smell was strong...but not unpleasant.

It must be some kind of spice, I thought. That would make sense of course. Someone who had lived here long ago had stored their spices here to keep them safe and dry.

I quickly closed the bag and put it in my sweatshirt pocket. I would take it back to camp and let dad look at it. Maybe he could help me identify it.

Just then a shadow passed by the window. Someone...or something...was outside. I jumped up and ran to the door. It was still locked. I didn't know who or what was outside, but I had to take a chance.

"Help!" I cried out, "I'm locked in here. Help me!"

I listened. I didn't hear anything at first. It was eerie...like time itself had stopped. All that I could hear was my own ragged breathing. I turned to walk over to the dirty window. I would have to chance it. At least I could get out if the glass fell out...or shattered. *Just be careful not to cut yourself.* I tried not to imagine myself staggering around lost and bleeding in the forest with a slashed arm or shoulder.

Just then, I heard heavy running footsteps outside. Something was charging the house! Before I could turn around, the door burst open! I started to scream...but couldn't. I was knocked to the floor as something heavy and damp ran into me and pushed me down.

"No!" I cried out, struggling to get away from whatever was on top of me. I felt hot breath on the back of my neck. At any moment, I just knew that I was going to feel sharp teeth sink into me. I tried to scream again, but nothing was coming out.

As I kicked my legs, I heard laughter. And I recognized it immediately.

"Jake!" I screamed, finally throwing my brother, who was now laughing uncontrollably, off of me and onto the floor.

Angrily, I stood up and looked down at my 9 year old brother who was rolling back and forth on the floor and holding his stomach.

He thought that it was the funniest thing that he had ever seen. But my heart was still racing!

"Hey Jake, that wasn't funny!" I screamed at him, stomping out of the house and back into the gloomy undergrowth of the large trees. Ahead, I could see sunshine poking through in various places. It appeared that the rain had stopped.

I took a deep breath, trying to clear my lungs of the stale, spicy smell of the house. I closed my eyes and tried to get my heartbeat to return to normal.

"You should have heard yourself yell," Jake said from behind me.

He was still chuckling as he came out to stand next to me. Casually, he bent over and picked up a rather large stick that was lying on the ground. Another giggle escaped from his lips as he started writing his name in the dirt. Every giggle made me madder and madder!

"You weren't really that scared, were you?" he asked, glancing over at me, "What were you doing in that old place?"

"Nothing!" I yelled back at him, "How did you find me, anyway? I thought that I was lost."

"No," he said, throwing the stick down on the ground and pointing over to his right, "The camp is right over there. I broke some branches so that I could find my way back. Didn't you?"

My face turned bright red. I wasn't sure if it was because I was still angry or if it was because my little brother knew more about finding his way around in the woods than I did. I closed my eyes and took another deep breath. At least I wasn't lost anymore.

"Look, that doesn't matter," I replied, "We had better get back to camp before Mom and Dad get worried."

"Wait a minute," Jake said, turning back to the old house, "What *is* this place anyway? It looks cool."

"It's nothing," I said, not wanting to go back into the house, "It's just some old house. There's nothing in there that's interesting."

Jake walked over to the window and looked through the cloudy glass, "I could see you standing in there."

"I know," I said, "I saw your shadow at the window. I just didn't know who you were."

"What?" he asked, turning back toward me with a puzzled look on his face, "I kept calling your name. I was practically yelling. I'm surprised that Mom and Dad didn't hear me."

I just stared back at him. I hadn't heard anything!

"You mean you didn't hear me?" Jake asked, turning back toward the house, "What is this house made of, anyway?"

I wasn't feeling well. My stomach rumbled. I was hungry. Also, I wanted to change out of my wet shorts.

"Come on Jake," I whined, "Let's go!"

"Hold on," Jake said, walking up to the door, "I tried to open this door, but it wouldn't budge. When I pushed on the door, my hand sank right into it. It was so weird."

"I know," I said, walking back toward the house, "The same thing happened to me."

Jake reached and touched the door. It had some more large holes in it. I guessed that they had been made by him when he had pushed on the door.

"Did you make those?" I asked, reaching out and touching the door. It was spongy to the touch.

"Yeah," he said, breaking off a small piece and holding it to his nose, "I thought that you might be trapped inside so I decided to run into the door. I didn't know that my hands were going to sink into it though!"

He took a sniff of the wood and made a strange face.

"What is it Jake?" I asked, reaching out and breaking off a small piece of the door as well. It came off easily in my fingers. I sniffed it. It had that strange spicy smell that seemed to surround the entire house.

"I don't know," he said slowly, "It just smells so familiar."

Jake put the small piece of wood into his pocket and quickly ran past me toward the back of the house.

"Jake," I cried out, tossing my piece of wood on the ground, "Wait! Where are you going?"

"I was exploring around back when I looked inside and saw you," Jake had stopped, staring at the trees.

The back of the house had the same sloping, melted look as the front. The only difference was the back of the stone fireplace jutting out. I looked at it and

my hand absently went to the pocket of my sweatshirt. I could feel the leather bag inside. I patted it gently.

"Listen Jake," I said, "I'm hungry. Let's head back now before it starts raining again."

"Wait Beth," Jake said, staring straight ahead, "Look at that! Isn't that a path?"

I stared in the direction that he was looking. At first, I couldn't see anything. Little by little though, I began to see what he was talking about. There was a place where the weeds weren't growing quite so thick. The trees weren't quite so close together. It did look a little bit like a path.

"Let's explore it," he said eagerly, running on ahead.

"Jake, wait!" I frowned, "We don't have time. We need to get back to camp."

"Oh, quit being such a baby," he called back, "Come on. We'll just explore for a little while and then we'll head back. Here, have a Hershey bar."

He threw me the chocolate and my stomach grumbled again. Well, perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad idea to explore a little bit more. Besides, Jake seemed to know the way back. I couldn't believe that I hadn't thought about breaking branches to find my own way back.

"Ok Jake," I sighed, following him, "But just for a few minutes."

The chocolate was rich and creamy in my mouth. Immediately I was sorry for eating it because it made me so thirsty that I thought I was going to die. But that didn't stop me from finishing it. I was already thirsty. *Might as well finish it now*, I thought.

Quickly I stopped to tuck the candy wrapper in the pocket of my shorts. I didn't want to be a litter bug.

I looked up and didn't see Jake anywhere. He had vanished!

Don't be silly, I thought, *He's just up ahead on this path.*

I broke into a light jog, knowing at any second that I was going to catch sight of my brother's shock of bright red, curly hair (like my own) or his blue Kentucky sweatshirt that my mom had bought us to wear on our trip.

"He couldn't have gotten that far ahead," I muttered to myself, starting to run faster.

I soon realized that I should have caught up with him.

"Jake?" I yelled, "Where are you? Where did you go?"

I stopped in the path, panting. I listened for any sound of my brother, but I couldn't hear anything.

He's hiding, I thought, *He's trying to scare me again.*

"Jake!" I yelled out angrily, "This isn't funny! I know what you're doing!"

I listened again, knowing that I would probably hear my brother's snickering. I could imagine him hiding behind some of the trees watching me twirl on the path.

"Ok, fine!" I screamed, "Be that way. I'm going back to…"

I heard a shout! It was Jake!

"Jake," I cried out, breaking into a run, "If you're playing a joke on me, I swear I'll get you for this."

I raced on down the path. I didn't hear Jake anymore, and I didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Suddenly, up ahead, my brother came into view. He was just standing there, looking down at the ground.

"Jake," I yelled, "What's going on? I heard you yell."

Jake just continued to stand there, looking down at the ground. I grabbed him by the shoulders. I shook him, making him turn his face toward me.

"Jake?" I asked, "What is it? Why did you yell?"

He didn't answer. He just pointed to the ground. I looked down and saw what had made him yell. My heart started pounding again. It couldn't be! Not out here in the middle of the forest. And yet, there it was.

Silently, we both stood staring at what unmistakably was a grave. That wasn't so bad. It wasn't like I hadn't seen graves before. This one was different though.

On top of the grave was a skull.

A cold chill ran down my back. I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

"It's not…not human, is it?" Jake whispered.

"No," I answered, "It's some kind of an animal. Maybe a dog?"

I bent over and took a closer look. The grave was old. Covered with weeds and old leaves, it lay in a small clearing in the forest. It was a rather large grave, so I knew that it had to be for an adult. Not a child.

I peered at the skull. It definitely looked like a dog or a wolf. I could see large sharp teeth still attached. The dark holes that had once held eyes stared back at me. I shivered and stood up again.

"Yeah," I said, "I think that it is a dog's skull."

"Who would put a dog's skull on someone's grave?" Jake asked, walking around behind the old flat rock that stood for a gravestone.

I didn't know how to answer him. I just stood there staring at the grave. Who was buried here? What kind of life had they led? Did this skull belong to their

dog? These and a million other questions were swirling through my mind. I wondered if this was the person who had lived in the abandoned house.

"Beth!" Jake cried out, staring in horror at the gravestone, "Come look at this!"

I quickly ran around the grave. I was careful not to step on it. I know that it sounds silly but I never walk on graves. I know that it's not like I'm going to wake anybody up or anything. I just don't like it.

Jake was pointing to the gravestone. I took one look and my blood froze in my veins.

Elsbeth. Just one word. One name. It had been crudely carved into the rock by someone long ago. The elements had worn it away so that it was almost unreadable. And yet, there it was.

"Elsbeth," Jake whispered, "It sounds like Elizabeth. Like…your name."

Another chill ran down my back. It was just a silly coincidence. It had to be. But still, it's not every day that you see a gravestone with your name carved into it. I grabbed Jake by the hand.

"Wait a minute," Jake pulled away, "There's something else carved into the stone. Look there!"

I kneeled down and gently brushed away dirt that had blown into the nearly worn away grooves someone had carved long ago. I pulled my hand away with a gasp as I read what was printed on the tombstone. *Elsbeth…may the evil never escape.*

"Come on," I said firmly, "Let's get out of here. I don't feel right about this. Let's just go."

He nodded, never taking his eyes off of the gravestone, "OK Beth. Let's go back to camp."

"Let's go. This way," I said, wiping my face. I was suddenly feeling rather hot. I hoped that I wasn't getting sick.

I turned around and started walking back toward the house. Jake followed behind me. I made sure that he kept up with me. I didn't want to get lost again. I hoped that he could find his way back to camp. He was usually really good at stuff like that.

Everything around us was so green and lush. I loved the way that the sunlight filtering through the leaves danced with little flickers on the ground. It made the darkness and dampness of the morning seem so far away. I started thinking about the house again. It was so odd, just standing there in the middle of the forest.

My throat was burning with thirst. That chocolate bar had been so good, but now all I wanted was a drink of cold water. I thought about sucking some rainwater off of the leaves around me, but I didn't want to take a chance at getting sick. My dad had told me that sometimes bacteria can live on the leaves and get into the rainwater. It wasn't safe to drink.

I tried to imagine how I would have lived if I had been alive 100 years ago. I would probably have lived in a little house like the one that I had found. I would probably have gotten my water from a stream or creek. I wouldn't have worried about bacteria or microorganisms or anything like that. Of course, people back then died early.

I was lost in my thoughts when I suddenly noticed that I wasn't on the path anymore. I stopped quickly.

"Ooof," Jake said, slamming into my back. Obviously, he hadn't been paying much attention either.

"Uh, Jake," I said nervously, "Do you know where we are? I think I've got us mixed up somehow."

Jake stood for a second looking around him as though lost in thought. I started to ask him what was

wrong when he held up a hand to shush me. I was starting to wonder if my little brother hadn't gone all psycho when I finally heard what he was hearing….a low steady growl. It was coming from directly behind us!

I know that I whisked around quickly, although it seemed like it took me forever. It was like everything was running in slow motion. For a second, I thought that I was seeing things. My eyes went all fuzzy and my brain hurt at what I was seeing.

No! I thought to myself. *It can't be. That's impossible.*

The creature stood on two legs. It wore a faded blue gingham dress that was ripped up the left sleeve. The bottom looked like it had been dragged repeatedly through the mud, and there was a dark stain down the front that could have been dried food. *Or dried blood,* my mind raced. Something wet and green that looked like snot was smeared all over both sleeves.

Although it was covered in course hair, the creature was obviously female. Large black claws curled on the end of long…extra long…fingers which were practically touching the ground. A long string of drool hung like a loose rubber band from the thing's lips which were parted in a fierce, toothy snarl. Black liquid pools of evil served as the creatures eyes, and I could see my reflection deep inside them…like I was lost in the dark. A low growl was coming from its throat as it slowly approached us from some dense undergrowth. It must have been watching us the entire time!

"Argh ranna bllot," the creature's teeth flashed as it gargled, "Argh ranna bllot….rallp!"

Both Jake and I stood frozen like deer caught in headlights as the creature slowly advanced. As it got closer, I could smell the incredible stench of the beast.

It smelled of old rot, decaying meat, and…something worse. I think that it was the smell that finally jolted me into action.

"Jake…run!" I screamed, grabbing my younger brother by the shoulder and whirling him around. Both of us took off through the woods, scrambling with wild panic as a roar of rage and hunger bellowed out behind us. Without looking back, I knew that it was right behind us.

If one of us trips, we're dead, my mind was a wild bird, flying around a room and trying to find a way out.

"This can't be happening…this can't be happening," Jake was panting beside me over and over again, "This can't be.."

"Jake!" I yelled, pushing him forward, "Shut up and run!"

My legs were pumping like crazy. My breath was coming in short, hot gasps and an incredible pain was starting to form in my side. I knew where we had to go!

"Go to the left Jake," I screamed, "We've got to make it back to that cabin!"

Something snapped sharp against my leg and I let out another scream. I was sure that the creature had bitten into my leg. I looked down quickly to see that it was just a branch that had flown back and hit my leg. Up ahead, I could see the cabin. I only hoped that we would make it in time. I could hear crashing and snarling behind us.

"Argh ranna bllot!" I could hear the creature howling with rage as it closed in on us. I wasn't sure if we were going to make it to the cabin alive or not.

Just as we entered the clearing to the cabin, Jake let out a yelp and fell face down into the dirt. His face hit the ground hard. I knew that this was bad.

"Jake!" I screamed, stopping and rolling him over. Blood was pouring out of his nose and his eyes had rolled back into his head, "Jake…wake up. We've got to get out of here. I can't pack you…wake up!"

A fierce throaty growl sounded right behind me mixed with a howl of victory. I waited for the inevitable. We were going to be ripped apart by that thing!

"Mmmmm," Jake's eyes focused and for a second he looked confused…and then he screamed out in terror.

"Come on!" I yelled, dragging him up by his arm. I took a second to glance behind us. The creature was not more than 10 feet behind us. It was running on all fours…like a dog…or a…or a…*wolf,* I thought. I let out one last scream as we bolted through the door of the cabin and slammed the door shut.

Good job! I thought angrily to myself, *Now you all are trapped in here. That rotten door had holes in it…it isn't going to hold that monster back!*

I waited for the creature to burst through the door. I looked around the room for something that I could use as a weapon…a stick….a chair…anything. I was crying out loud from fear and exhaustion as I stumbled around the room.

"Jake…Jake…" was all that I managed to say.

We were both crying. I tried to hold myself together…to be strong for my little brother…but this was just too much.

"What's going on here!" I shrieked, pounding my fists on the wall of the old cabin. I could still smell that spice as it invaded my nostrils with each gasp of terror that I made.

"Hey….wait a minute," Jake was holding his bleeding nose as he limped over to the dirty little

window, "I think….that it left. Listen…you can't hear it anymore."

I stopped moving like a crazy person around the room and tried to get control of my breathing. As my heartbeat and breathing slowed down, I realized that he was right. The howling had stopped.

"Do you think it is still out there?" I asked cautiously as I tiptoed over to the window where Jake was standing.

"I don't know," he murmured, "Owww….my nose is killing me!"

I took a look at his busted nose. Most of the bleeding had stopped. It looked like it was going to swell a little, but I thought that he would be fine….if we could get away from the creature in one piece, that is!

I took another peek out of the window. I didn't see anything outside…not that it was easy to see through the layers of grime.

"I'm gonna' take a better look out of the door," I whispered, "You stay here."

Jake nodded as I slowly crept toward the door. With a whisper of a prayer, I cautiously opened the door a crack and stuck my face to the opening.

"Argh ranna bllot!" echoed through the air as the creature lunged toward my face….fangs dripping with hot, foamy slobber. I let out a scream….there was no escape!

As the fangs flew toward my face, I screamed and put my hands up in a poor attempt at self-defense. I wondered if it would hurt much…being ripped to shreds.

"NO!" I screamed, closing my eyes at my advancing doom.

I felt a whoosh of air as the door slammed shut in my face. Spinning around, I saw a pale-faced, wide-

eyed Jake. He had been right behind me and had sprung forward, closing the door just in time. I noticed that a small trickle of blood was starting to form again around his swelling nose.

We waited, breathlessly, for the howling beast to crash through the rotten wood of the door. Once again, we were shocked to discover that we couldn't even hear the vicious snarling at all. It was like the creature disappeared when the door was shut!

"I guess…I guess that it wasn't gone," I smiled weakly at Jake, trying to make him feel better.

Jake smiled back, slowly rubbing his nose, "No. But why doesn't it just come on in? What's stopping it?"

My mind was whirling. The floor was swirling under my feet, and I had to sit down. Slowly I sank to the floor, trying to think.

"At least we are sort of safe in here," I croaked out in a throaty, panicked voice.

"For a little while at least," Jake said, crossing the room and trying to peer out the window again.

"Hey Beth!" he cried out, "I found a place in this old window where I can see out. That thing is right outside the door! It keeps trying to rush toward it but then it runs back at the last second. Come here!"

I ran to the window. What Jake said was true. Although the beast was obviously able to crash through the rotten wood of the door, it acted like it didn't want to get too close. It reminded me of someone jumping back when they got too close to a fire.

"Haven't you noticed," Jake continued, "That we can't hear it while we are inside this house? I mean…**come on**…this house isn't that well built. We should be able to hear something. I can't hear a thing…can you?"

"No," I murmured, watching as the creature tried once more to rush the door.

What was going on? Why couldn't the snarling horror get inside the house. Outside, the beast ripped at its dress in anger, foam flying from its glistening fangs. Elsbeth…if that was who this creature really turned out to be…was getting very angry.

"Maybe Mom and Dad will come and rescue us," Jake offered hopefully.

"Come on Jake," I whirled around from the window, "Do you think that Mom or Dad could stop that thing? It would rip them to shreds."

Tears started to well up in Jake's eyes. I felt terrible. He was just a kid. He didn't need this…neither of us did.

"Listen." I said, crossing the room to the old fireplace, "We've got to find a way out of here."

"Maybe it will give up…and…and…go…away," Jake was really starting to bawl now…getting hysterical.

"Hey," I walked over to him and put my arms around him, feeling his heart racing under his shirt, "It's going to be ok. At least we seem to be safe right now."

Something was starting to tickle the back of my mind. I tried to think about where we were…the house. There was something special about this house…but what? It was just a broken down little shack that had been abandoned in the woods. There wasn't anything special about this house….except that there was.

"Aaachoo," Jake suddenly sneezed in the gloomy darkness.

"The powder!" I cried out, reaching into the large front pocket of my sweatshirt and grabbing the bag that I had placed there earlier.

"What in the world are you talking about," Jake was wiping his nose, which had stopped bleeding again…even with the powerful sneeze that he had just produced.

"Don't you smell it?" I was suddenly talking a mile a minute like someone insane, "This whole house smells…it reeks! That's what made you sneeze. And it just isn't dust…well, it is dust…but not really. It is powder…or spice…or something…"

"Hold on!" Jake called out, making a time-out signal with his hands, "What in the world are you talking about?"

"This!" I cried, holding up the bag of spice, "I found it in this house. This entire house smells just like it. At first, I just thought it was for cooking. But now, I think that it was kept for protection. Maybe the people who lived here before sprinkled it in the walls or something."

"Jake!" I continued, "That…that thing…outside. It can't get in here. Haven't you seen how it jumps away from the door? It doesn't like the SMELL! It can't get in here because this spice is holding it back! This entire house STINKS of this spice."

"Okay genius," Jake walked over to the window, "So tell me…how is that going to get us out of here?"

"Well," I muttered, coming off of my manic high, "I haven't quite figured that out yet. Do you have any ideas? Jake? Jake?"

I heard a low moan of terror and glanced around to see Jake, shaking with fear at the window.

"Jake…what is it?" I screamed, running over and peering out of the tiny clearing in the dirty glass.

My heart started racing again. My tongue felt like it was stuck to the top of my mouth. My eyes widened

until I was sure that they were going to pop out of my head.

It was true that the creature couldn't burst through the door. The smell was holding it back. But the creature wasn't trying to break through the door anymore.

It was digging…down in the soft earth outside the house. I knew that it would only take a few minutes for it to tunnel beneath the house….and break through the dirt floor beneath us!

The floor was dirt…it didn't have the protection of the spices like the walls did! Somehow, I knew that just sprinkling the spice on the dirt floor wouldn't do any good. The walls had been soaking up the smell for years and years. What was a few minutes going to do? Already I could hear the snorting of the creature's heavy breathing under our feet…the vibrations from it heavy claws ripping and tearing at the soft soil. I could imagine those same claws ripping and tearing into me…into Jake.

If we tried to run, the beast would catch us in a second. If we stayed where we were, it was going to break through the floor. It was all over with. There was no way that we could get away now.

We were as good as dead.

The snorting of the beast grew louder under out feet. I felt Jake cling to me as the dirt began to move on the floor of the old cabin. The creature was seconds from breaking through. This was the end.

Then suddenly it hit me. It was so obvious…it had been all along. I had just been too panicked to have realized it.

I tore open the top of the bag of spice that I had found in the old fireplace.

"Close your eyes!" I shouted to Jake, as a black claw tore through the floor.

"Why?" he screamed.

"Just do it or we are going to die!" I yelled back.

Most of the time, Jake would do just the opposite of what I told him to do. Little brothers are like that. Fortunately, this time he decided to listen. I guess that the threat of death will do that to you!

As soon as his eyes were closed, I dumped half of the bag of spice over Jake's head.

"Hold your breath," I muttered as I quickly wiped him down from head to toe with the brown powder. The smell became overpowering as I dusted him thoroughly. I prayed that this would work…it just had to.

Closing my own eyes, I tipped the bag over my head and deposited the rest of the spice onto me. Even when my breath was held, I could still smell it. It seemed to have a life of its own.

The spice was cold. I started to shiver as it slid off of my hair and down the back of my shirt. It didn't feel like it was falling on me. It felt like it was….crawling. Like it was alive! I rubbed my hands over my clothes….really working the powder in good.

I opened my eyes and looked at Jake. He was staring at the floor. His face, hair, clothes, and even his shoes had taken on the odd brown color of the spice. I tried to breathe through my nose, but the powder whooshed up my nostrils making me cough and sputter.

"Kkkack…come…kkaack…on," I grabbed Jake by the wrist and flung him toward the door, "Let's make a break for it."

Just then the floor opened up underneath my feet, and I fell. I looked down and saw the black evil eyes of the creature as it snarled with dripping fangs.

On reflex, I shook the bag of spice…now nearly empty…toward its face. Brown residue flew into its eyes, making it roar with a mixture of anger and pain. It clawed at its face, trying to rake the spice from its nostrils.

I jumped up and pushed Jake out the door. It was now or never. We wouldn't have another chance at escape.

"Run!" I screamed, "No matter what…just keep running."

My legs felt like rubber. I knew that we weren't going to escape the evil terror that lay behind us. It would be after us in a flash of fur, teeth, and ripping claws. There was no way that two kids could ever get away from something like that…something so evil and unnatural. We were doomed.

My lungs ached to bring in more air, but all that I could breathe in was particles of spice….setting my lungs on fire. I could feel my heart racing, trying to keep up with my mind….*faster, faster…must go faster.*

Branches from trees lunged toward my face, scratching and clawing at my eyes. A thorny bush grabbed my legs and threatened to trip me as I kept pushing Jake forward. I tried to listen for breaking branches behind us as the beast ran us down…but my ears were whirling with panic. The only thing that I could hear was myself as I cried out in fear. I could feel hot tears burn their tracks down my dirty face.

The spice was starting to burn my skin. I could feel it working its way down deep into my pores. Sweat ran into my eyes, bringing the spice with it. My vision blurred as the spice stung and bit. My stomach rolled as the overpowering smell of the spice seemed to turn from a pleasant smell into a stench that reeked like rot

and decay. *Like the dead*, my mind conjured up from some distant horror movie that I had seen.

I thought that I heard a roar behind me…could feel hot breath down the back of my neck…hot foamy saliva dripping on my skin. I glanced back in horror, knowing that I would see the snarling face of the beast…of Elsbeth. Nothing was there. My head flew back around…and I felt strong arms grab me!

"Noooooo!" I screamed, struggling to break free from certain death.

"Elizabeth!" it was a voice that I instantly recognized. It was my dad.

I took another look around. I was back at camp! Jake was lying on the ground in front of me…panting and crying. I screamed again and ripped myself from my father's arms.

"We've got to get out of here! It's right behind us!" I was screaming and flapping my arms like some overgrown bird trying to take flight. "We've got to…"

And then the world seemed to swim before my eyes, like I was looking at it from underwater. The smell of the spice was everywhere. It enveloped me like a burning cocoon. And like a caterpillar, I sank to the ground. Darkness overtook me and led me to a place where I was safe…where the horror of Elsbeth could not come. Sleep was blissful.

I awoke in darkness. For a second, I wasn't sure where I was at or what I was doing. Then the horror of the day's events came racing back into my mind, tearing a scream from my throat. I tore open the flap of my tent and stumbled out into the clearing that made up our campsite.

"Dad," I croaked with fear and thirst, "Mom? Where are you?"

I listened intently to the sounds of the forest at night. Crickets chirped their melody that seemed to keep up with the ever increasing beat of my terrified heart. Deep breaths shuddered out of my body. Overhead, the full moon hung heavy and low like some sick, bloated eyeball. It was watching me from the dark sea of sky as I twirled helplessly in the middle of my own nightmare. Only this nightmare was true.

"DAD!" I yelled louder. My skin was really starting to itch. I scratched it with wild abandon, ignoring the burning sensations that came afterwards. I wondered if I was breaking out in a rash…from the spice…that horrible powder.

I heard a low moan come from the other side of my tent. My feet stopped twirling and my mind went into overdrive. What in the world was there? I was afraid to say anything and afraid not to say anything.

"Dad?" I said again, lower this time.

"They…they can't…they," it was my brother Jake. His voice sounded muffled…strange. Maybe he was having a reaction to the powder as well. I started to walk around the tent to see him but I stopped. Something was wrong. I scratched my arms and legs again. They were itching so much! I couldn't take it!

"What's wrong Jake!" I called out, "Where is Mom and Dad?"

"They can't…can't…" he started out, "They went out into the woods. They wanted to see for themselves."

I started walking toward the sound of Jake's voice. My heart started to beat faster. It felt like it was going to explode right through my itching, burning chest. His voice….it wasn't quite right. Something was off about it.

"Jake…are you alright?" I asked, slowing down. Suddenly, I didn't want to know.

"They wanted to see it for themselves," Jake said again…and then he laughed.

That laugh made me stop dead in my tracks. It was so low…so throaty…so guttural. It didn't sound human.

"They saw alright," he grunted. It sounded like he was having trouble breathing.

"Jake, stop it!" I cried out, "You're scaring me."

"Scaring her, she says," he laughed again. I moaned and started walking toward him again. Something had happened to him alright. He sounded like he had gone crazy.

"I heard them, you know," he kept on talking in that strange voice, "I heard them screaming. I heard that thing….rip into them. Their screams…so long…so loud. Screaming and screaming and screaming. And then silence. And then crunching. Bones….crunching."

"NO!" I screamed out, running around the tent to face what my brother had become, "Stop it Jake…..stop telling lies!"

For a second, I thought that I was seeing things. A strange effect of fear and night shadows. My brother was still my brother…but not for long. He had changed.

He was lying on the ground….shaking like he was freezing to death. Dark hair had sprouted across his entire body. He had ripped his shirt off of himself. His claws kept scratching at his skin…ripping it off of his body. His claws were long and dark. But the worst were his eyes. Black pools of evil gleamed up at me in the moonlight. As I screamed out, he laughed again. Long fangs gleamed in the moonlight.

"NO….DEAR GOD NO!" my own strange voice called out. I looked down and realized with horror that I was changing as well.

Fur was sprouting from my body. Already my fingers were replaced with long black claws. I could feel myself start to fade away. I was being replaced with something else. I tried to scream and found that I couldn't. In the night, I heard the lonesome screech of a beast instead. Only this time…the beast was me.

In the dark of the forest, she slowly crept to the old cabin. Aged beyond any numbering of years, her long gray hair hung like an oily mop in her haggard face. Her toothless mouth worked on its own like it belonged to someone else. Not that she needed it for anything other than eating. She hadn't spoken in over 100 years.

She seemed to glide like mist over the ground as she entered the cabin door. Although they were covered with a heavy film, her eyes saw the hole in the floor. Her ***children*** *had been very busy today. A throaty, phlegm coated gurgle came out of her mouth. It was the closest thing to a laugh that she could muster.*

Stealing her way to the fireplace, she took the bag of spice, full again, that she clutched in her gnarled hands and placed it in the hiding place.…just as she had been doing for the last century or so.

Some knew her as the voice of the mountain. Some knew her as the creeping death of the night hills. Others simply knew her as Elsbeth.

The spice would wait. The spice would be here when some other lost soul happened to follow a little blue bird into the cabin. The spice was her one certainty. It would work its dark magic on the lost children of the forest…and ensure her continued life…such as it was. It was part of the pact that she had made to the Darkness all those years ago. Their lives…for her own continued life.

Life was life…such as it was. In the distance, she could hear the screams of the two new lost souls as they tore through the forest…searching for food. They would find the food they seeked….or at least the remains of what was left.

With a wave of her hand, she vanished. In her place stood a tuft of blue feathers. With a flick of wings, it flew up the chimney and into the night.

The evil of Elsbeth would continue on.

Somewhere on a lone strip mine in Breathitt County, a night watchman stood his guard. In the distance, he could hear the lonely, fierce howls of the coyotes. At least he assumed they were coyotes. It sounded like they had found something to eat. He could just make out their growls and the crunching of bones.

He shivered as a dark cloud passed over the full moon. He hated this job.

The Tale of Elsbeth Warding

In the early 1800's, Breathitt County hadn't been formed as of yet. A woman named Elsbeth (probably a mispronunciation of Elizabeth) Warding lived near where Beaver Dam is today…up in the Hardshell area. That area was still part of Perry County at the time. Surprisingly there were quite a few people living in the area, considering the poor condition of the roads.

Back in those days, it was hard for people to get to the doctor. Doctors were more often than not considered to be outsiders and weren't trusted. Most people just used home remedies when a member of the family got sick. If it was really bad, they often went to a local member of the community who knew how to use mountain herbs and such for healing. Elsbeth Warding was one of those people.

In March of 1824, several children in the community accused Elsbeth of luring them into her home to draw blood from them. People accused her of being a witch. On March 23, 1824, several men from the area broke into her home. Tying several large stones to her body, the men threw the old woman into a large hole of water in Troublesome Creek. Supposedly

Elsbeth drowned, but there is no record of her body ever being found.

In June of 1824, nine witnesses testify to seeing a pair of bony hands reach up and pull seven-year-old Arlie Smith under the water of Troublesome Creek at a family reunion. His body was never recovered. Ten days after the apparent drowning, a large dark dog was seen prowling the area. Several chicken houses were broken into and many small pets went missing. It was at this time that many of the people who had accused Elsbeth Warding of being a witch started to leave the area. Many of these people headed north, and their descendants are still living in areas of Indiana and Illinois to this day.

In December of that same year, two children were reported missing in the woods just five miles from the old cabin where Elsbeth used to live. One was a girl, Sarah, and the other a boy, Thomas. I couldn't find any reference to a last name. Anyway, the boy was found frozen to death and half eaten (wolves, coyotes..???) six days later up near where Little Buckhorn is today. His sister was never found. However, there are reports that another large dog figure was seen running in the area soon after.

I didn't find any other references to Elsbeth Warding or the history of this part of Breathitt County. I'm still researching it though. It seems that some people still report strange happenings in the Hardshell part of the county. Some have reported weird glowing lights at night. Others have reported to seeing an old woman walking in the woods at night. Strange voices and sounds of howling have also been heard. Is this just coincidence? Or is something about the story of Elsbeth really true? We may never know.

The Beauty of the Darkness

Summer's end is near at hand
Fading sunlight on the land

A touch of death as time decays
We sense the fall of passing days

For some the fields are full of bounty
Other ones have wasted crudely

A gathering of minds and men
In prayers the sun returns again

The Headache

Sally Johnson walked into the small house that she shared with her sister, Mary, and knew right away that it was going to be bad. Actually, it was always bad when you considered Mary and her shrill, piercing voice. However, Sally knew that it was going to be really, really bad because the drapes were closed and the house was still as a tomb.

She tried to tiptoe into her room without notice, but it was too late.

"SALLY!" her sister's grating voice clawed its way into Sally's head and scratched down her spine, "Come here at once! I'm having one of my…"

"Sick headaches," Sally muttered under her breath, walking toward her sister's darkened bedroom…the best room in the house.

"Sick headaches," her sister Mary finished.

Sally sighed and climbed the stairs to her sister's room. How long had this been going on? Five years? Six? Ten? It was so long she couldn't remember. All of her days and nights had just started to blur together into one long day of taking care of her sister and treating those headaches.

Dr. Kern at Kentucky River Medical Center had given Mary a complete examination…CAT scan, X-ray, the works….years ago.

"Sally," he had said, "Let me give it to you straight. There's nothing physically wrong with her. I can't explain her headaches except to say that it must be something…well…in her head. For some reason, she is just willing herself to believe that she is in pain. I suggest a good psychiatrist."

Well, of course, Mary had refused to believe that. They had been going to doctor after doctor for years. Since no doctor in Jackson had given her what she had wanted, Mary had gone to doctors in Mt. Sterling, Lexington, Louisville, and even Chicago! She never got the satisfaction that she needed. The worst thing was that she always seemed to drag Sally along with her.

"Oh but you just HAVE to go!" Mary would wail, clutching her chest as if her heart was paining her instead of her head, "Whatever shall I do without you?"

In spite of it all, Sally loved her sister Mary. She had to love her sister. She had given up so much in order to take care of her. For one thing, she hadn't had much time for dating. Her one true interest had given up on her two years ago when it had become apparent that she wasn't going to leave Mary to take care of herself.

"Marry me," he had whispered to her under the August moon. When had that been…two years ago?

She had wanted to say YES….yes, I'll marry you. But then the cold, hard reality of Mary had stormed to the front of her mind. She couldn't just leave Mary all alone. Finally, he had given up. She had loved him so much and had just let him go. He had given her one last kiss goodbye and then had driven off while Mary screamed on and on about her head in the background.

Now, at 42, Sally was facing middle-age with nobody to share it with but her screaming, clinging sister.

"SALLY!" Mary screamed, "Where in the blue blazes are you? My head is killing me! I need my pills! Where are my pills?"

"Coming Mary," Sally called, reaching the top of the stairs with a low ache starting to form in her back. It had gotten worse over the years of tugging, lifting, and taking care of Mary.

Moments later, Sally entered Mary's bedroom carrying a tray of assorted pills and a cold glass of water. She carefully tiptoed over to her sister's side of the bed and set the tray down on her nightstand. Mary lay moaning with a washrag draped over her eyes.

"Mary?" Sally whispered cautiously, "I'm here. I have your pills. Try to sit up darling and take these."

"Ohhhhh," Mary whined out loudly, "Why even bother. They never really do any good."

"Come on Mary," Sally begged, "Please take the pills…for me?"

Sally was tired. She just wanted Mary to take the pills and go to sleep. At least if Mary was asleep then Sally could get some much needed rest. She was exhausted from doing the laundry, cooking the meals, washing the dishes, mopping the floors….well, basically everything. Mary hardly ever got out of bed anymore.

With one loud grunt, Mary propped herself up in the bed and opened her large, gaping mouth. Sally placed one of the pills on Mary's tongue and then held out the glass of water. With one sip, Mary's eyes went wild and wide.

"Pffft!" Mary spat the water into Sally's face, wetting her with a hot shame, "What in the…you know better than to give me cold water. It aggravates my

headaches! I need water that is exactly room temperature. How DARE you!"

With a horrible shriek, Mary smacked the glass out of Sally's hand sending water and pills flying all over the floor. The sound of broken glass cut like shards into Sally's mind.

"Just look at this MESS that you have made!" Mary cried out, grabbing Sally's arms with her talon-like fingers, "I'm sick. You know how I am when I am sick, but YOU DON"T CARE!"

"Mary, I'm sorry," Sally's eyes were filling with hot tears. She could feel them running down her cheeks.

"Sorry? Sorry?" Mary mocked, "Is that all you can say. You cow! Clean this mess up and get me some more water…at room temperature. And hurry! My head is killing me."

The room seemed to swirl in front of Sally. Those words…those horrible mocking words were still ringing in her ears. She started to cry a little louder as she bent to pick up the broken glass. She cried out as a sharp edge bit into the fingers of her left hand.

"Quiet, you idiot," Mary screeched, settling back down into the bed, "Remember…I'm the one who is sick…..my headache."

Suddenly, Sally found it hard to breathe. All those years…those wasted years…taking care of Mary. She saw herself in the future…a broken down old woman taking care of her still shrieking sister. What did she have to look forward to except death? The room started to sway in a sickening manner. She had to get out…get away from Mary.

Without looking back, she ran out of the room and bolted down the stairs. It was at least twenty minutes later when she realized that she had run out of the house and down the little dirt road beside their

house in Hardshell. The ache in her side was fierce, biting at her like a wild animal. She stopped to take some deep breathes and to clear her head. It was at that moment that she saw something that would change her life…and Mary's life…forever.

The house stood on a small hill. In all of her years of living in Hardshell, she had never noticed this house before. True…it was partially hidden behind two very large weeping willow trees, but Sally could have sworn that nothing had ever been there…except maybe an old, broken down barn.

"Strange," she whispered to herself, walking slowly toward the neat little cabin that had so mysteriously appeared…not twenty minutes from her own home that she shared with Mary.

Just then the front door opened and out popped a little old lady with bright silver hair and an equally bright (but blue and red) dress. The old woman waved and smiled cheerfully at Sally. Sally waved back and then turned to go…she guessed that she had better get back before Mary threw a righteous fit.

"Hold up there young lady," the old woman called after her as she turned.

Sally stopped. Young lady? Well, she guessed that a 42-year old woman would be considered young by someone that old. How old did the woman appear? 75? 80? It was hard to tell.

"Can I help you?" Sally turned back toward the cabin and smiled at the little old woman who was now motioning her to come up to the porch. With a small sigh, Sally climbed up the steps.

"Sit…sit!" the old woman smiled at her, bright blue eyes twinkling with amusement, "I saw you from my window. You were running down this road like the

Devil himself was after you! What's the matter sweetie? Man trouble?"

Sally sank down in one of the old porch rockers that resided on the old woman's front porch.

"No…no," Sally said, "Nothing like that….it's just…well….complicated."

"Mmmmm," the old woman took a seat in the rocker next to Sally, "I understand….don't want to talk to some crazy old lady. Hee hee…well, we all get old, I guess."

Sally was shocked, "No…no! It's not that…exactly. Well…I guess that is part of it. I mean….I didn't even know that you lived up here. I only live a few minutes away, and I have never even seen this house before!"

"Sally Johnson…right?" the old woman smiled over at her, taking out a small, dark brown pipe and lighting it with one swift movement of her gnarled hand, "You and your sister Mary live in that big house…the big white one with the garden. Lovely garden, by the way."

Sally was flattered, "Yes, the garden has always been my pride and joy. I'm sorry though….I have no idea what your name is. Have we met before?"

"We've passed in Jackson," the old woman smiled, puffing a small curl of smoke between her cracked lips, "I don't think we've ever spoken though. My name is Elsbeth….Elsbeth Warding."

"Well…it's nice to meet you Ms. Warding," Sally reached out her hand.

The old woman cracked a big grin and started to laugh, deep and throaty. It sounded like a cat being run over by a coal truck. Sally grimaced slightly at the harsh sound.

"Lord, child," the old woman chuckled, tears running down her cheeks, "Don't call me that. Call me by my name…Elsbeth."

"Well…. it's nice to meet you Ms. Elsbeth," Sally smiled, shaking the old woman's hand at last, "Sorry…I just have to put the Ms. on there. It's just the way my momma raised me."

"Oh…that's alright," Elsbeth was still chuckling softly, smoke escaping from her nose and drifting into the mountain air, "Just don't call me Ms. Warding anymore. You sound like one of them bankers at the First National!"

Sally smiled softly and then wiped the back of her right hand across her eyes. They were still wet with tears. She wondered how Mary was doing.

Stop thinking about that old sister of yours, she thought to herself, *Can't you even take five minutes to visit with a neighbor!*

Elsbeth reached out and took Sally's hot palms into her own cool ones. She took one more puff off of her pipe and looked deep into Sally's eyes.

"Child….something's bothering you," she said softly, "I wish you'd tell me. Sometimes it helps….sometimes it's better."

Then something clicked in Sally's chest and the tears started to flow. Not just little tears….great, burning tears that ran down her cheeks in a heavy stream. Her voice hitched in her throat. Finally, she started to talk, and all of the pain of the last twenty years came spilling out of her mouth. She realized as she went along that she was talking faster and faster….sounding hysterical. She silently prayed that she wouldn't scare the old woman.

Finally, it was over. She finished up by explaining the morning's events and how Mary had finally just criticized her one too many times.

"I just had to get out of that house," she whispered, looking up from the porch floor into Elsbeth's eyes.

Elsbeth Warding stared back at her. Her eyes glazed over for a minute as though she were deep in thought.

She thinks I'm a nut, Sally's mind was racing. She prepared to stand up and leave. At least she got to talk to someone…even if they thought she was some loon job who was running around the neighborhood.

"Hold on child," Elsbeth finally whispered, clutching Sally's hands painfully tight, "I think that I might have just the thing that's gonna solve all your problems. That is…if you want to take it."

Sally's breath caught in her throat. She waited for what the old woman was going to say next.

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Sally Johnson slowly walked up the little dirt lane toward the home that she shared with her sister Mary. Although Breathitt County was getting more and more pavement on the county roads, Hardshell still had more than its share of little dirt trails that could hardly be called roads. Every now and then she would stare down at her hand that was clutched tightly at her waist. Mary was probably foaming at the mouth at this very minute. It would take hours for Sally to get her calmed back down again. She opened her hand and stared at the five tiny seeds that were hidden inside. They were as black as a coal miner's grave, but they weren't cold. Instead, they seemed to pulse with a life of their own.

"Take these, child," Elsbeth Warding had crooned, producing them from some secret pocket in her bright blue and red dress, "Plant these tonight."

"But…but…" Sally had started, "It's September! Growing season is over with for the year. What could possibly grow from those seeds at this time of year?"

Ms. Elsbeth…that's what Sally had called her….had just chuckled in that low, throaty way of hers…smoke curling up from her pipe and nostrils. Sally had felt a chill run down her back…just momentarily. It wasn't like someone had walked over her grave…it was like a whole marching band had tromped over it!

"Child…child," Ms. Elsbeth had chortled deeply, "These seeds are a special secret of mine. They'll grow…believe me. And the results…well, you'll just have to see it to believe it. But just know this…it will take care of your sister's headache."

"How?" Sally had asked, suddenly interested. Anything that would cure Mary of those blasted headaches was worth her very soul itself. Had it just been her imagination…or had Ms. Elsbeth's eyes seem to glow a little brighter at that exact moment? She shook it off as a trick of the fading light as the sun began to slip over the tops of the mountains.

"Hurry child!" Ms. Elsbeth had forced the seeds into Sally's left hand, "There isn't time to waste. You've got to hurry home and get these planted before the moon rises tonight. Now listen carefully…"

Sally had listened intently as Ms. Elsbeth had leaned close and whispered some feverish instructions to her. At first, Sally hadn't been able to pay one bit of attention. The old woman's breath had been horrible. It had stank. *Of the grave*, her mind had brought up from some old horror novel she had read long ago.

"Don't be ridiculous," Sally smirked to herself. It had just been the sour breath of an old woman who obviously didn't practice good oral hygiene. That pipe probably didn't help matters much either.

Now that she was almost home, Sally's heart began to beat a little faster. What if this actually worked? What if this took care of Mary's headaches once and for all. She quickly ran to her work-shed and grabbed a hoe. She thought quickly for a second and then grabbed the pocketknife that she kept for cutting twine and rope in order to tie up her peas and beans. She slipped the knife in her pocket and ran back to the garden which was overgrown with late summer weeds.

Working with a feverish pace, she started clearing away a little patch of land on the far side of the garden. The soil looked tired after its long summer's toil. Sally doubted if the seeds would do anything at all. It was probably just some old woman's mad ravings. Still…if there was even the slightest chance that this would work….she would have to try it.

Bending down and feeling the ache in her lower back, Sally made a hole and quickly planted the five seeds. Then…acting on Ms. Elsbeth's instructions…she took out the pocketknife that she had grabbed from the work-shed and quickly sliced open one of her fingers. Squeezing sharply she let three drops of blood fall onto the seeds.

"This is so crazy," she muttered as the blood dripped down into the soil, "But she was very adamant about this part. She said that I had to do this or it wouldn't work."

She had been slaving away her blood, sweat, and tears for most of her life anyway. What were a few more drops?

Finishing up, she covered the seeds with a layer of dirt just as the sun began to set. An owl hooted in the distance and a sharp cold wind blew across the back of her neck. She shivered convulsively and jumped up. There was that feeling again! The feeling that there was a whole crowd of people dancing on her grave. What in the world was going on?

Turning toward the house, Sally saw that her sister's bedroom lamp was on. That meant that Mary was still awake….and probably suffering more than ever. In turn, Sally knew that she would be suffering more than ever. It was going to be a late night. It was going to be a long night. It was going to be a bad night. There would be cold compresses to make…pills to fetch…and water. But not cold water…no, never cold water.

She bit the inside of her cheek hard enough to bring blood and marched toward the inevitable.

"Might as well get in there and get it over with," she groaned. In the distance, it sounded as though a pack of wild coyotes were howling and fighting over something. Probably the remains of a deer or elk from the sound of it. She thought that she could actually hear the crunching of bones. It made her feel slightly nauseous.

If Sally had chosen to turn around at that very moment, she may have been surprised to see that five little sprouts had already broken through the top of the soil. Five little sprouts that were a deep, dark red….as red as blood. She may have also been surprised to see that these sprouts were quivering in the increasing chill of the evening. Quivering…as though they had a life of their own.

But Sally did not turn around. Instead she slowly walked into the house, hearing her moaning sister

calling out for her from the upstairs bedroom. The door quietly closed behind her with an audible click. The howling and fighting of the coyotes continued to ring through the hills of Breathitt County in the approaching night. Somewhere in Hardshell, evil had sprouted.

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Mary Johnson lay in bed with a cool washcloth over her eyes. Her head was killing her…as usual. She didn't know how long this headache was going to last. They usually didn't last over a couple of days, but this one had hung on for almost a week. She was a little worried. Even the pills…the small blue ones that made her go deliciously numb…didn't seem to be working.

She still felt a little guilty about snapping at Sally the other night. She hadn't meant to be so cross! But her stupid sister knew better than to give her cold water. It always made her headaches worse. Deep down, she was afraid that her sister would get fed up with her antics and leave her all alone. So, she had tried to be a little nicer to Sally since that night. She had even listened to her when Sally had started driveling on and on about something that she was growing in the garden that was going to take care of Mary's headaches!

Mary had snorted a laugh out of her long, thin nose at that one. She had been to some of the finest and most expensive specialists in the world! How was her silly mule of a sister going to help her with a folk remedy? However, she was still trying to make nice, so she just nodded her head and acted interested whenever Sally brought the subject up.

She actually wondered how Sally was growing anything in that weed patch that she called a garden

anyway. It was already starting to frost outside. Surely most of her plants were dead…or dying. Two days ago, Mary had struggled out of bed and hobbled over to the window to take a peek at the garden. She had seen Sally bent over some strange looking vines that seemed to have exploded right out of the ground. It looked like Sally was doing something with a knife. Was she cutting herself? That would explain the bandages that Sally had taken to wearing on both of her hands. But why would she be doing such a thing? She shivered and decided not to let on that she had been spying. She just decided that she would act like nothing was wrong.

Sally prattled on and on everyday about how quickly the plants were growing.

"They should be ready soon!" Sally had laughed out last night, a feverish glow in her eyes. Mary didn't think that her sister was looking all too healthy.

Mary was just thinking about calling Doctor Kern at KRMC….not for herself but for Sally….when Sally burst through the bedroom door and cried out, "Come on Mary! It's time! The plants are ready!"

"What!?" Mary snapped, jerking the washcloth from her face, "What in the world are you talking about Sally?"

"The garden!" Sally giggled, "We've got to go to the garden. Right now! They're ready….the plants are ready! We can get rid of your headache once and for all!"

"Really Sally," Mary snapped…she was feeling so angry right now because of all the pain, "You know that I can hardly get out of bed. How am I supposed to get all the way to the garden?"

"Come on!" Sally cried out, looking half-crazed, "We've got to go…NOW!"

Mary decided that she would humor her sister…go to the garden…and then call the doctor. She couldn't have her sole care-giver having a nervous breakdown.

"It's probably just some old weeds," she thought to herself, "I'll have to act like I am really cured or she ***will*** go crazy!"

Working together, Sally half supported and half carried Mary down the stairs and out the door to the garden. As Mary drew closer to the garden, she saw the vines that Sally had been so carefully tending the entire week. They were enormous with large fleshy leaves that were a dark green, tinged with red. Something about the size and color of them made her feel uneasy.

"How long have you been tending these Sally?" she croaked out, seeing that the vines ended into some equally large orange globes. Were those pumpkins? They looked funny somehow…distorted…*damned.*

"Only a week," Sally's voice was behind her…urging her closer to the vines that lay sprawled in the ruin of the garden. Mary shivered again as she thought she saw one twitch. It was probably just the wind…or a mole.

Standing next to the vines, Mary saw that they were indeed pumpkins. But they were the strangest looking pumpkins that she had ever seen. They were so big that they looked engorged. Each of them was striped with that same sickly red color. *Like the color of blood*, she thought. She bent down to touch one.

"That's…that's impossible," Mary said, her voice barely a whisper. Something wasn't right about this. Everything about this was all wrong. But her head…her head….it was just **killing** her! The pain had actually become a steady throb that never ceased. She didn't know how much more she could take.

"So…how…how are these supposed to help…my….my headache," Mary managed to croak out over the throbbing pain that had spread from her head and down into her neck.

Behind her, she heard the rustling of leaves. It's going to eat me, she thought. She could imagine the vines wrapping around her body. She quickly turned…only to discover that it wasn't the plant moving at all. It was her sister. But…no! It couldn't be!

Sally stood over her…one large pumpkin held high over her head. She had that glazed look in her eyes once again. It was almost like it wasn't her sister at all anymore. Her pale face was streaked with dirt and sweat and looked almost skeletal.

"LIKE THIS!" Sally screeched out suddenly bringing the pumpkin down on Mary's head, knocking her to the ground. It was the last thing that Mary ever saw as her world exploded into a bright red supernova that faded to black.

Sally began to laugh as she brought the strange, warped pumpkin down again and again on Mary's smashed-in head. As the pumpkin rose back up into the air, it changed color from orange to orange-red to red….a wet, runny red. The whacks began to take on a thick, wet, meaty sound. Sally saw that the pumpkin was now speckled with bits of white and gray. The pumpkin never smashed open. Sally looked down at the remains of her sister's head. She had seen a raccoon once that had been run over by a coal-truck. What she saw now was worse…but only slightly. She giggled….Mary wouldn't be bothered by her headaches ever again.

"I'm free," she whispered. Only the wind was there to listen to her.

Hours later, Sally sat in her kitchen eating a piece of freshly baked pumpkin pie. She took a deep breath. It felt so good to be free. Nobody would ever come looking for Mary. Mary hadn't had any friends…just doctors. No one would miss her at all. No one would suspect that she was now safely buried in the garden.

"At least now she can do some good," Sally mumbled as she shoved forkful after forkful of hot, steaming pie into her mouth, "She can fertilize the corn next year!"

As for the murder weapon….well, it had finally taken a chisel and hammer to crack it open….but she had finally succeeded. Now, she was eating the last remains….freshly baked in a pie. Nothing had ever tasted so sweet! *And no murder weapon to be found,* she thought.

Cleaning up after herself, Sally marched upstairs. She was giddy! Tonight she could sleep and not have to worry about taking care of Mary…or her blasted headaches. She was free from that curse forever. She silently….oh, the blessed silence!….put on one of Mary's old gowns. Mary wouldn't need them anymore! She quickly climbed into Mary's soft bed…much nicer than her own had been. Slowly she lay down on Mary's soft pillows and closed her eyes.

She lay there for a while…trying to get to sleep. If ***only*** she could sleep! Everything would be even better. But try as she might….all she could do was toss and turn. It had started as soon as Mary had died….that pain….small at first but growing with every passing second. It was really bad now! The worst that she had ever felt.

Her head. Her head had started to ache. Pains had started to spear into her like sharp claws…or knives.

Jumping up out of the bed, she clutched her throbbing head. It was the worst headache of her life…and somehow, she knew that this one wasn't going to end….ever. No pill or potion would ever cure the torment that she was now suffering.

And then she heard it….the laughing. A deep throaty laugh of an old woman….Elsbeth!

"Where are you?" she screamed, clutching her aching head and whirling around. The old woman had to be here somewhere!

Just then, another voice joined in….a sinister laugh that she had heard many, many times. It was her sister! Her dead sister. The two of them were laughing at her!

As the pain started to shoot through her head like a shotgun blast and claw its way down her neck and into her entire body, she began to scream. She never stopped. Never.

Wow…poor old Sally. She should have just enjoyed her life instead of obsessing over her sister. I hope that you are able to enjoy the fruits of autumn more than she did! Don't you just love autumn?

You can feel it in the air at night. That brisk kiss of frost that whispers in our ears that autumn has arrived. The air doesn't have that sensuous feel of summer anymore, and we know that the days will continue to grow shorter and shorter as we progress even further into the dark side of the year. Like everything else, the year is growing old.

Earlier this evening, I sat on my front porch and marveled at the sights and sounds of nature all around me. The sun was slanting through the trees like a stream of liquid gold. As it brushed against the leaves, it painted them with its brilliance and reminded me that soon the leaves will have a brilliant color all their own. This is when Mother Nature puts on some of her finery for a fashion show that has the rest of the world in awe. Everyone else tries to mimic it, but you can't beat the original.

I also noticed that the world has taken on the slow gentle pulse of a watch that is winding down. Everything seems to be going at a much slower pace. By now, most of the crops have been gathered. The last remaining bounty of fields could possibly be the bright orange pumpkins and other fall squash that are appearing in the stores and at roadside stands. Let's

just hope that Sally Johnson or Elsbeth aren't selling pumpkins…LOL!

This winding down is one thing that I love about autumn. Nature is a smart woman. She is telling each of us…in her own subtle way…to slow down and take a look at the world around us. In this age of everything on demand, people are often impatient and want everything yesterday. We have fast food, fast cars, and even drive-in churches (I saw one at Daytona Beach!). Why not slow down for a while and actually live your life instead of letting your life get out of control? The world isn't going to end if you stop for just a second to breath in some of that crisp autumn air and enjoy a cup of warm cocoa or apple cider.

The Earth knows that now is the time to stop and rest. Through this rest, there is renewal. We as human beings can't just stop living. However, we can slow down and reflect on our lives and the direction that we are taking. Perhaps we have strayed from the path upon which we intended. Maybe this is a good thing…maybe not. At least we need to consider our life choices and the consequences that we are facing. If we don't like them, we can change them. However, if we don't reflect…we can't change.

Take some time to enjoy the season. Heat some cider. Bake some cookies. Pick a pumpkin. Plant some mums. Whatever you do…enjoy life. It is the only one you have.

Here is a recipe for Autumn Cider. I love it and have enjoyed it for years. This is an old family recipe that I now pass on to you! Enjoy it with my blessings!

Spiced Autumn Cider

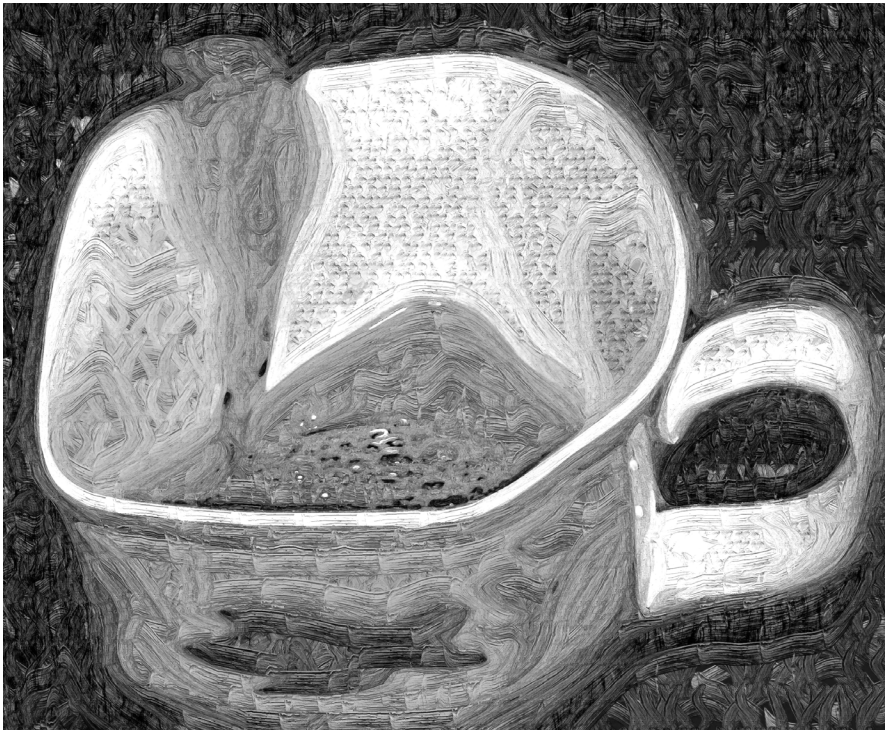
Ingredients

- one gallon apple cider
- one cup orange juice
- one lemon, thinly sliced
- 4 cinnamon sticks
- 2 whole cloves
- 1 teaspoon allspice

1. Place all of the ingredients in a sauce pan. Cover pan and bring to a low boil. Reduce heat and simmer for at least 15 minutes.

2. Strain into a large bowl and enjoy! You can also strain this and then put it in a crock pot to keep it warm throughout the day.

3. Sit outside in the cool, crisp air. Inhale deeply over your cup of hot cider. Drink!



Darkness of the Dar-koth

It was midnight. The late night crickets were chirping out a sweet lullaby that had soothed the world to sleep. But not me. I was awake. Painfully awake. I paced back and forth on the worn, wooden floor of my living room with only one thought on my mind. Chocolate chip cookies. I had to have one. No…scratch that. I wanted a ***whole*** bag.

Not just the dry, crumbly ones either. What I wanted were the big, soft, chewy kind that come in a pack of 3 for $10.00. Pricey? You bet! But worth every penny. My mouth was watering with anticipation. I just had to have a bite…a mouthful….of gooey chocolate chip delight. I knew that I would surely die if I didn't have one.

OK. So I probably *wouldn't* die. But I didn't think that life was much worth living without a bite of chocolate wonder. I just had to have the object of my desire! The only problem was that it was midnight, and I lived out in the middle of nowhere. Not many people have ever realized just how big Breathitt County is.

That is…until they are stuck in it…in the middle of the night….with a chocolate craving.

I knew what I had to do. I had to make a trek to the 24 hour Wal-Mart in Hazard in order to purchase a package of the biggest, chewiest chocolate chip cookies that I could find. Like a junkie searching for my next fix, I grabbed my keys, gave a squeal of delight, and roared off in my little car.

My headlights probed the foggy darkness…two probing eyes. I was on the lookout for any stray deer or other wild animal that might choose to end it all in the path of my car. I didn't want to be an aide in some beast's suicide attempt so I drove carefully. As I drove through the hills of first Breathitt and then Perry County, I chanted my mantra. "I'm on my way to get the cookies. I'm on my way to get them now."

Over and over, I continued with my jingle as if by magic it would get me to my destination all the faster. I noticed that it had started to drizzle small droplets on the windshield. A storm was starting to brew in the dark heavens overhead.

Once, as I was passing into Perry County, a slightly obese skunk waddled in front of my car. I managed to swerve quickly and avoid it. Leaving in the middle of the night in order to purchase cookies would be something that I could easily manage to explain to my wife. Coming home with a car that reeked of skunk odor for weeks would not be as easily forgiven.

However, the sight of the skunk reminded me to be careful. I didn't want to hit a deer. My wife had hit one a couple of years before and had nearly totaled the car. A repeat performance was not wanted!

As I neared the top of Rowdy hill, I noticed a man walking along the road. Normally, I don't pick up hitch hikers. It is a general rule of mine. However, this guy

looked friendly enough. Besides…it had started to rain. All of these things meshed together in my mind, and I found myself slowing down. I rolled down my window and yelled out, "Need a ride? I'm heading to Wal-Mart in Hazard if you want a ride that far."

"Thanks man," the young fellow said, hopping into the car as the rain started to come down in earnest outside, "I thought that I was going to be caught in this storm."

We drove on in silence for a little while. In the back of my mind, I was chastising myself for picking up some random stranger on a dark, stormy night in the middle of nowhere. But what can I say? My mind was clouded by the thoughts of those chocolate chip cookies. With each passing mile, I was closer to my objective. I could almost smell them.

Suddenly, what I feared the most happened. A deer darted out into the road in front of my car. I screeched the brakes roughly, making the car turn sideways on the wet pavement. For one brief second, I could have sworn that I had hit the animal. I actually felt a bump. The car continued to swerve madly and my world took on a crazy, hallucinogenic swirl. Oddly enough, I was still thinking about those delectable chocolate chip cookies. What was wrong with me?

In a matter of seconds, which seemed to stretch on for days, my car came to a stop. My heart was racing and a dry bitter taste was alive in my mouth. I saw with alarming fear that I had almost plunged over the high bank and into the deep, rocky valley below. I knew that I had just escaped serious injury…or death…by a mere few feet.

"Are you okay?" I asked the young fellow who was sitting strangely still beside me.

"Fine," was all that he said.

I didn't take the time to think about how strange he was acting. I just knew that I had to get the car turned around before a truck or some drunk came whizzing around the curve. I just couldn't die on my way for something as frivolous as a pack of cookies. Just what would I tell Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates? I'm sure that he would get a big laugh out of it!

Just then, my hitchhiking friend spoke again, his voice deep and guttural, like his tongue was thick and swollen, "You know…you don't have to rush. The store isn't going to run out of chocolate chip cookies."

"Yeah, I guess that you are right," I smiled weakly and managed to get my car back onto the road.

Just then it hit me, "Hey! How did you know that I was going to buy cookies?"

I screeched the car to a halt as the rain started to pour down around us. The sound was deafening on the roof, but I heard every word that he said with perfect, chilling clarity.

"I know a lot of things about you."

He turned toward me. That is when I noticed that he didn't have a right eye. There was just an empty black socket staring back at me.

I almost started to scream. The sound was alive and well in my throat but died as it moved over my tongue. Instead a small whimper managed to escape from my quivering lips. Why had I picked up this freak in the first place? This wasn't like me. It was like I was living in the pages of a tacky suspense story written by some two-bit hack of a writer. I decided to make the best of it.

"Wow," I managed to sputter out, trying to just ignore what the guy had previously said, "That was a close call, wasn't it?"

The young fellow just turned his head and stared out of the front windshield again. The storm had really started to howl outside the car, and I felt like joining it. All I needed now was for his head to start twirling around and around like Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*.

"All I wanted were some blasted chocolate chip cookies," I muttered under my breath as I put the car into drive and pressed my foot down on the gas, "How do I get myself into these situations?"

As my foot pressed harder on the acceleration pedal, I suddenly noticed that we weren't accelerating. In fact, we were doing quite the opposite. Suddenly my entire dash lit up like a Christmas tree on methadone. Lights were blinking, buzzers were buzzing, and I was cussing.

I managed to get my car over to the side of the road so that it wouldn't be smashed to bits by some random drunk flying through the hills of Eastern Kentucky on his way to the liquor store before it officially closed for the night. As my car lurched to the side of the road, white smoke began to belch forth from under the hood. All I needed now was for the cliché sound of a backfire. As if to answer my thoughts, a shot rang out into the night. There was my cliché.

So there I sat. Stuck beside the road, in the middle of the night, with my car belching smoke and random bangs. To top it off, I had managed to pick up one of the contestants from FOX's new reality show, *Who Wants to Marry a Serial Killer*! I half expected him to start muttering under his breath about how he wanted to cut me open and free the tiny aliens which were trapped underneath my skin.

I glanced nervously over at my traveling companion, "Looks like we're stuck."

He continued to stare out into the inky night air and did not speak a word. I closed my eyes and tried to mutter a prayer. It had been months…years…since I had prayed, and I hoped that I was still able to do it. Wasn't it like riding a bicycle?

I knew that I was going to feel the icy hot steel of a knife stick into my chest at any moment. In fact, having my eyes closed just made me feel even more trapped. I decided that I would finish praying with my eyes wide open…just in case.

I glanced over, knowing that the last face I would see on the planet would be the one-eyed freak smiling at me gently as he carved me into a million pieces. Was I going to end up in someone's freezer? I hoped that he froze my best parts. I wouldn't want the police to find me in a few years and go, "What in the world is THAT?"

The seat was empty.

I hadn't heard the door open. I hadn't heard him leave. I was sure of it.

With a trembling hand, I reached over and felt the door. It was dry. I knew that there was no way that he could have gotten out of the car in this terrible storm without getting the door wet from all of the rain. Squeaking like a mouse, I fumbled for the button which locked all of the doors. If he was outside of the car, I didn't want to take a chance of him getting back inside.

I peered out into the night. I couldn't see anything except the rain….and the smoke which still continued to seep out from under the hood of my cursed car. It was growing less thick, however. Perhaps this was a good sign.

I took another look back over at the empty seat beside of me. I still couldn't believe that he…whoever he had been…was gone. And yet, the seat was empty.

As I looked closer though, I realized that the seat was not completely empty. Something was wedged into the crack between the seat and the back…something small and black. I reached over and gently tugged at the object. It came out freely. With one quick motion, I clicked on the dim overhead light so that I could see well. It was a feather. A black feather. A crow feather.

A low crunching sound was coming from the back seat. Startled, I looked up into the rearview mirror. As a wave of panic crashed into me like an ocean wave made entirely of needles, I saw that *he* had returned. He was in the back seat. His one good eye was twinkling in the dim overhead light. His other eye was still a gaping black hole.

But the worst thing was that he was eating a large chocolate chip cookie. He ate with rapid jaw movements…like an animal. Bits of cookie were flying crazily from his fiercely smacking lips.

"Ssss Goooood," he slurred out, spewing crumbs over the back of my head and neck.

With one enormous bellow, I was out of the car and running blindly into the driving rain. I dashed off of the road in my panic and into the thick trees of the nearby woods. I didn't stop running….even when the branches of the trees started to scratch at my face. I was lost in the woods….in the middle of the night….during a terrible storm. Behind me, I could hear a mad chortling. I wasn't alone.

I was running blind. My panic raced through my veins, a hot lion of emotion that chased away all rational thought and left me frantically stumbling in the dark. The rain was an icy sheet around me, soaking my soul as well as my flesh. Tree roots tripped my feet and threatened to spill me onto the forest floor. Brambles and briars ripped at my clothing and flesh, sending

sharp white ribbons of pain that remained unfelt until later. Branches clawed at my face, scratching for purchase on anything soft and fleshy. I dangerously came close to losing an eye myself…just like the creature which now stalked me in my midnight prison.

Panic does strange things to people. My body was wired on adrenaline. It was fight or flight time, and I was in full flight. My mind, however, was shutting down. Instead of the rapid thoughts that an intelligent person would possess, I was now an animal, scrambling in fear from the dark shadow of the overhead hawk or the oncoming coyote. If there had been a hole that was large enough, I would have probably tried to burrow into it. In the back of my dangerously diminished mind, I was still somehow aware that I was whimpering aloud.

Behind me, the chortling laugh of the madman was coming ever closer. The voice was unnatural and seemed to carry with perfect clarity, even in the rampage of the storm which was unleashing around me. An insane thought drove itself into my mind, a steel pick from the depths of my subconscious, that he was not walking through the woods…but floating. I didn't know how I knew this, but it was as if God's camera had taken a photograph and implanted it into my brain. And, I also knew, that he was still eating that large chocolate chip cookie.

A cry of desperation tore itself from my throat, burning and tingling its way from the pit of my stomach. Death does not come easy for most of us, and I could hear the final throngs of my own mortality. So therefore, it was quite a surprise when I broke from the tangled limbs of the woods and stumbled into a dimly lit clearing.

Before me sat a small stone building. It appeared to be old, but the occupants had clearly kept it in good

order. No stones were missing and the roof appeared to be in good repair. In fact…and my heart skipped a beat in joy at this prospect…there appeared to be people inside the building. Could this be my salvation?

As if in answer to my unspoken prayer, the door quickly opened and the face of a young woman appeared. She was dressed in a white robe and was staring at me as if in shock. She snapped from this unnatural state just as quickly however as the chortling behind me turned into a howl of rage.

"Quickly stranger," she beckoned with one long thin arm, "Enter…if you value your life."

Glad to be out of the rain and away from certain doom, I made haste and scurried through the door. With a soft but solid click, the door closed behind me. I saw with great satisfaction that a large wooden beam was settled into place over the door, locking it from outside influences…namely, an insane one-eyed stranger who was obviously intent on killing me (or worse)!

"Quick," I shouted, "Call the police. There's a crazy man following me…he seems dangerous…we've got to get the cops up here."

The woman simply smiled at me. I saw now that she was young, her long blonde hair falling gracefully over her narrow shoulders. Her blue eyes, so perfect in the candlelight which twinkled around us, were sparkling with patience…and was that slight amusement as well? I saw that her skin was white…almost like marble. There was little contrast with the white robes which swaddled her as she stood listening to my emotional ravings.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," she simply stated, "We haven't a telephone here. But don't fear. You are quite safe."

"What do you mean!" I stomped over to the small window, knowing that I would see the face of my oppressor staring back at me with one-eyed glee and murderous intention, "I told you…there is someone following me. He's crazy…he could break in here at any minute and kill us both…."

"The Dar-koth will not enter this domain," the woman's voice was strangely calm, "His domain is the darkness. This is a holy place."

I looked around. Was I in some sort of church? That would explain the peaceful feeling that had swept over me, slowing my racing heart and calming my panicked mind. It didn't look much like any church I had ever seen before though. And who had a church out in the middle of the woods?

"Dar-koth?" I asked, walking away from the window, which was streaked with the fierceness of the outside storm, "I don't understand."

"The creature that chases you," the woman walked over to a small table that stood in the center of the little room and rang a tiny silver bell, "We call it Dar-koth. It is…a demon. Evil spirit. A rage. Whatever you prefer."

"It is evil," she continued, "And it wants your blood…and your soul. For some reason…which I do not know…it has bonded to you…with you. It will not rest…cannot rest…until you are dead."

I shivered. She was just as crazy as the man who was chasing me. A sudden horrific thought crossed my mind that she was perhaps related to him. Maybe they were in on this together. What if the bell was to summon him? Would he enter the room now….also dressed in a white robe…and carrying a sacrificial knife of some kind? My eyes scanned the room for a weapon of some sort. I had to protect myself!

"Don't be alarmed!" the woman smiled gently, sensing my fear, "You are quite safe here. The Dar-koth cannot enter. This is a place of peace."

A small door at the far end of the room opened and two more women walked through. I sighed with relief. At least it wasn't my stalker.

These women were much older. Their skin wasn't as smooth, although it was still an unnatural white. Their hair was silver and it shone with a magnificent brilliance in the light of the flickering candles. They walked toward us, also dressed in white robes.

"Is this the one?" one of them spoke, her voice quivering with excitement like a small child on Christmas morning, "Is this the one of whom the oracle spoke?"

I was confused…and was ready to bolt out the door. I had only wanted to go to Wal-Mart and purchase some chocolate chip cookies. Now, I felt as though I had slipped down Alice's rabbit hole. What in the world was going on?

Outside the door, a sharp roar of pain and rage rang out. Although I felt safe inside the little house, my skin suddenly covered itself in tiny bumps. My hair rose and my teeth started dancing. I felt as though someone had reached out and grabbed hold of my very soul. A dark despair began to flow through me, and I was horrified to find myself shuffling slowly toward the door.

"Hold him sisters," the young woman pointed toward me, "He is answering the call of the Dar-koth. We must take him into the inner sanctum. Only there will he be truly safe. And that is where we can tell him what he must do if he ever wishes to survive with his life…and his very soul."

Although I wanted to go with the women and get away from the dark horror which waited for me outside, I found myself struggling. Part of me, it seemed, wanted to run toward the certain death which waited for me outside the large wooden door. Part of me craved it…much as I was still craving the chocolate chip cookies which had started this entire mess.

"Come now," the old women cooed in soft voices, their hands gently but firmly tugging me toward the door at the end of the room, "Don't fight. You want to live, don't you?"

In the end, my love of life won over. Although the dark howls coming from outside still tugged at some place in my soul, I crossed into a much larger room. The door shut behind me, instantly cutting out the sounds of my oppressor. I looked around in amazement.

"Welcome to the inner sanctum," the young woman stood before me, standing in front of the most bizarre thing that I had ever seen in my life, "Welcome to your destiny."

I could not believe what I was seeing. The so-called inner sanctum of the building in which I now stood was much larger than I had thought that it would be. I didn't recall this building being so huge while I was standing outside. However, I will admit that it had been raining and dark. Also, I had been running for my life from the one-eyed stranger that these weird ladies called the Dar-koth. All of that had been strange…very strange indeed. But the strangest thing was what I was seeing before me.

In the middle of the enormous room stood a statue of the Pillsbury Dough Boy that had to be at least 15 feet tall. It was in the perfect stance of giggling, holding its belly with its mouth thrown open, just like

on the television commercials. Hideous in its size, the statue was made even more ominous by the fact that someone had removed the lovable eyes that we all know belong on the Pillsbury Dough Boy and had replaced them with large red stones. It looked like his eyes were bleeding.

"What is this place?" I asked, gaping at the giant form before me. The women in white were staring up at it in worshipful awe. In addition to the three that I had already met, I saw four others. That made a total of seven women with unnaturally white skin dressed in long white robes. It was just getting stranger and stranger.

"Behold…the oracle!" the women cried out in unison. Apparently they were speaking of this huge idol inspired by the Pillsbury company. I wondered where they had obtained such an item. Had they stolen it? Surely things like this weren't common property!

The room felt like it was spinning around me. I could no longer hear the cries and screams of the Darkoth. But I was now surrounded with a new form of insanity. All that I had wanted were some…

"Chocolate chip cookies!" I yelled out in surprise as the young blonde woman who had originally shown me into the building arrived in front of me with a large plate overflowing with enormous, chewy chocolate chip cookies. My hand reached out instinctively for one, but she smacked it away.

"Wait!" she cried out, smiling mischievously, "We must summon the oracle before we take communion!"

Communion? Was this some sort of twisted cult? I hoped that they weren't going to pull out vials of poisoned Kool-Aid and expect me to join them in a tiny bit of ritualistic suicide. The women had gathered

together around the statue of the Pillsbury Dough Boy. I could hear a low chant begin to form in their throats.

It was weird. That is all that I can say. I could never make out what they were saying because the sounds never fully sounded from their lips. It was like they were singing inside their own throats. The sounds remained low and muffled….secret. Then again, it was like I could understand every word with perfect clarity. I kept catching images of doors, unlocking in my mind and opening themselves to reveal the secrets of the universe. Just when I thought that I had my finger on a major revelation, however, the song would shift just a bit to the left, and I would lose it again. Frustrating….true. But it was beautiful.

I stared, my mouth hanging open, as the song seemed to lift into the air and circle around the pastry idol that stood before me. My heart started to race again as I noticed the red stones in the thing's face begin to take on a newly found luster. It was almost as if they were watching me. A sweat broke out upon my face, and I felt the sudden need to sit down. Since there were no chairs, I sank slowly to the cold, stone floor.

"The oracle has awoken!" the women cried out in unison, their voices continuing to chant their strange messages into the air around us. I suddenly realized that I was also chanting along with them. I had no idea what I was saying or how I even knew what to say. All that I knew was that I was joining my voice to theirs.

"Here, take communion with us," the young blonde woman had returned. She was offering me the plate of chocolate chip cookies again.

As if in a trance, I reached out and grabbed a large warm cookie which seemed to beat with a life-force of its own. Would it screech in pain when I ate it? I bit into the soft cookie, half expecting blood to run out of it

and drip down my face…but there was only the taste of the chocolate chunks melting delectably on my tongue. I devoured the rest of the cookie in a few bites, noticing that the others around me were also eating cookies from the plate and smiling at me.

Soon, the young blonde returned with a great golden chalice. Strange runes encrusted the outer rim as the bejeweled handle twinkled hypnotically in the candlelight.

"Drink," she whispered, placing the heavy cup to my chocolate coated lips.

The milk was warm and delicious. It ran down my gullet, warming me both inside and out. Once again, I felt as though all of the mysteries of the universe were within my grasp…just slightly out of reach.

The room took on an unnatural sheen. I wondered if I had been drugged….visions of Jonestown running through my mind. Wouldn't this make a lovely picture for the evening news? I could see the headlines now…Man Killed in a Cookie Coven. Poisoned Pastry to Blame.

I glanced up and my heart skipped a beat. The Pillsbury Dough Boy was staring right at me! I was sure that his head had been staring straight ahead earlier. Now, it was bent toward the ground…the large red eyes gleaming and shining. I was too much in shock to move…or perhaps it was the drugged cookies stealing their tiny purchases into my dying brain. I wasn't sure.

"Listen stranger!" the women were dancing around me, their robes flapping and their hair flying in strange patterns that seemed to spell out the recipe for creation, "The oracle is speaking!"

And I could hear it. God help me, I could hear the voice of the thing. It echoed in my mind and reverberated inside my skull. I will never forget what it said….

The oracle was speaking. Amazingly, it sounded just like the Pillsbury Dough Boy on all of the television commercials. At any time, I half expected it to break out with a nice little, *Nothing says lovin' like something from the oven!* But it didn't. Instead, I heard the following verse resounding inside my frantic mind.

One is cursed
By Dar-koth's greed
A midnight feeder
Now the feed

To break the curse
Escape the wrath
Allow your feet
Down moonstone path

To foil the evil
Find the three
Along the path
They will be seen

The hermit lone
Away from all,
A silver wedge
For trees to fall

And last the twins
Imprisoned they,
Defeat Dar-koth
Before new day

Regain your life
Through toil and toll
Or fail the quest
And lose your soul.

And then, just as suddenly as it had started, the voice ended its rhyming chant. Around me, the women were still dancing about and chanting their wonderful song inside their throats. Chocolate from the chocolate chip cookies had coated their lips, making them appear to be wearing some hideous makeup. It was especially alarming against their pale white faces.

I noticed that the "oracle" was once again just a giant statue of the Pillsbury Dough Boy. The shining wisdom that I had seen glowing in the bright red eyes was gone. Whatever force or spirit which had inhabited the thing was gone. We were once again alone.

I felt a shiver run through my very soul. I had no idea what the oracle was speaking about. Was I the one who was cursed by the Dar-koth? Apparently so, since it had been chasing me through the forest earlier in the evening.

"I'm never picking up another hitch-hiker again," I muttered to myself as the dancing wonders around me began to calm themselves down to a trot.

"You are blessed!" one of the women came running up to me, "The oracle spoke directly to you. That is rare indeed!"

"Yes, sister," the young blonde woman who had shown me in earlier said, "But he is also cursed. The Dar-koth wishes to feed on his blood…and soul. You heard that thing outside!"

It was all too much for me. I just wanted a nice place to sit down. Didn't these women ever stop moving

about? They were making me dizzy with their frantic movements and their weird singing. I just wanted some peace and quiet…and to wake up from this crazy dream.

The young blonde must have realized that I was starting to freak out because she clapped her hands, making the others stop their hurried dancing. With the ceremony over, they quickly cleared the room, leaving me alone with her.

"What is going on here?" I asked her, helpless in my confusion.

"I know that all of this must be strange to you," she said, looking into my pleading eyes, "It is often strange when the boundaries of our world start to slip. Most people don't even know that things like the Dar-koth and the oracle even exist. You are lucky."

"Lucky!" I snorted, "If you think that it is lucky to be chased by some madman through the woods on a rainy night then…"

"I only meant to say that you are lucky to be able to sense the unseen world," she quickly interrupted, "To see things that others only dream about. I feel that this is the reason that the Dar-koth is after you. You are one of the special few who are not afraid to peer into the mists…to dare to dream."

"Listen lady," I started toward the door, just wanting to escape this madness, "I don't know what kind of whacks you and your dancing friends are, and I don't really care. Just let me out of here and we'll call it even…okay? I won't even go to the cops."

"My name is Marianne," she spoke with the voice of authority, making me stop in mid-step, "And if you leave this place that way, the Dar-koth will be upon you in an instant. He is a powerful creature…but he can be defeated. Did you not listen to the oracle?"

The Dar-koth….the oracle….it was all too much. I let out a cry of frustration and grabbed the closest thing that I could reach, which happened to be one of the leftover chocolate chip cookies, and flung it against the floor. It was so soft and chewy that it just splattered in a little pile. I felt like my mind was splitting in half.

"So what do you suggest?" I asked this lady who called herself Marianne, "That I just live here the rest of my life? I do have a wife who will come looking for me eventually you know."

She smiled at me again, "Of course not. Did you not hear the oracle? You have only until daybreak. After that, I don't think that even we can stop the Dar-koth from taking you. You must find the three of which the oracle spoke. Did you listen? Oh stranger! Your very life….very soul….depends upon it!"

I tried to remember what the oracle had said. Something about a moonstone path….and three things…or people. I think one of them might have been a crab…no…a hermit! That was it!

"I have to follow something called a moonstone path and find a hermit," I said slowly, trying to remember what else the Pillsbury Dough Boy had chorused to me just moments earlier.

Marianne stared at me for a moment, seemingly lost in thought. She then ran to the idol to pastry lovers everywhere. I kid you not when she reached up and pushed in on the things belly. With a giggle that seemed to come from everywhere at once, the giant Pillsbury Dough Boy slid backwards across the floor revealing a set of stone steps leading down into a dark corridor.

"Quickly!" Marianne said, "Follow this passageway. It will lead you outside. There you will

find the moonstone path. Just look for the rocks that glow like the moon. They will lead you to the hermit."

"But I can't remember the rest of the rhyme!" I insisted as she pushed me down the steps into the darkness.

"You must try to remember!" she whispered urgently, prodding me along, "Your very life and soul depend upon it. Make haste! The sun will rise shortly. The sisters and I will distract the Dar-koth for the moment in order to give you some time. But it will soon realize that you are gone! Quickly…before it is too late! Find the hermit."

The statue slid back into place over my head, leaving me alone in the dark. Was this to be my grave? With my heart beating wildly in my throat, I began to feel my way through the pitch. I knew that I was going to die. I had to find the hermit…whoever ***he*** was! The cold wetness of the night air slapped me across the face with a ferocity that was unexpected. I was near the end of the tunnel which stretched before me like a tomb. I had almost expected to be trapped forever…stumbling through the dark until I died.

Marianne had shown me the way into the tunnel underneath the statue of the Pillsbury Dough Boy. Mumbling nonsense about a moonstone path, she had bid me to make haste and find the hermit who lived nearby. All that I knew was that I had picked up a one-eyed stranger earlier in the evening who had turned out to be a lunatic. The women in the stone building that I had just exited called him a Dar-koth…or demon of some kind. According to them, he was after me to kill me…and devour my soul. I had even believed that the statue of the Pillsbury Dough Boy had spoken to me.

"That's just ridiculous," I muttered to myself, "Nothing like that happens in real life…only in stories."

Now that I was free from the insanity behind me, I made up my mind to try to circle back around through the woods and find the road again. Perhaps my car would be working again, if I could find it. Or maybe I could flag down someone who could take me to Wal-Mart…or a phone. I knew that there was a BP gas station just up the road from here.

I pushed away the branches that grew to cover the exit from the tunnel and stepped out into the night. The heavy rains had stopped, but there was still a light mist falling from the sky. I started to shiver. It seemed that the temperature had dropped quite a few degrees from before. How was I ever going to find my way out of this mess?

I stopped…aware that I was standing open-mouthed yet again. I had been in this awkward position so many times this evening that it was amazing that a moth or other flying insect hadn't taken up residence inside my mouth. Of course with my luck it would have been something more sinister…like a bat….with rabies.

Before me stretched a path. That wasn't too amazing. After all, there are many paths in life. We are all on a path if you think about it.

What was amazing about this path was that it was lined in stones that glowed with a soft, pale luminosity. Instantly I thought of the moon. It was almost like pieces of the moon had broken off and fallen to earth. The glow wasn't steady. Instead, it faintly pulsed…like a heartbeat. In the darkness of the forest, this one little light seemed so warm…so comforting. But my soul was chilled. I knew that I was looking at the prophesized moonstone path.

"It can't be," I whispered to the night, "This shouldn't be here. It doesn't make sense."

If the night was going to answer back, it chose not to at that time. In the distance behind me, I could hear another howl of rage and pain that made me cry out in fear. It was the howl of the Dar-koth. Did he know that I was no longer in the stone house? I turned back to see if I could see anything….the house…the creature…anything. All that I saw were trees. I had been in the tunnel for at least 30 minutes. I had a good lead on the creature if it was coming after me. I had a sense though that it was still trying to figure out a way around Marianne and the other women. They said that they would keep it busy while I searched for…

"…the hermit," I whispered, turning back onto the path and starting forward. Perhaps this was to be my destiny after all.

As I moved among the dark, dripping branches of the Eastern Kentucky night, I tried to remember how I had been just two hours prior. I had been happy and warm back in my little log home in Hardshell. It had been my own gluttonous desires that had sent me into the darkness on a quest for chocolate chip cookies. How I started to loathe the very thought of those cookies now! They were the very reason why I was in this mess. Still…if I was offered a large, chewy, warm chocolate chip cookie, I knew that I couldn't resist. They were my one true weakness. Hey….what could I say….I was weak! We all have our vices, after all.

I must have walked for about 45 minutes. I thought that it was strange that I hadn't come upon any roads or other paths since I had been in the woods. I wasn't much of a woodsman…unlike my father. However, I did know that these woods weren't THAT big. I should have come upon some sort of civilization within the amount of time that I had spent walking.

"Maybe I'm going in circles," I muttered aloud, my heart starting to beat a little bit faster.

Perhaps I was just circling about….back to the clutches of the madman…demon…Dar-koth. No wonder I hadn't heard the Dar-koth pursuing me. He hadn't had to. He was just waiting patiently for me to stumble blindly….panting and out of energy…back to his clutches. What would happen then? Would he kill me like the women had said? Was he just a madman…or something far more sinister? I almost felt like turning around and running back to the tunnel.

And yet…the moonstone path (if you could call it that) had remained true. The softly glowing stones continued to draw me deeper and deeper into the labyrinth of the forest. Deep down, I sensed that the only way to salvation was to continue my forward trudge. I was going to face my fate like a man….not like some dog with its tail tucked neatly between its legs. My death would not come easy.

It was at that very moment that I thought that I heard something moving in the bushes off to my right. I stopped dead in my tracks. The only sound was the quickened sound of my frantic breathing which I tried to control. My eyes scanned the darkness, searching for movement. I neither saw nor heard anything. My imagination must have been running wild like an uncaged beast. That was dangerous in turbulent times such as this one.

I began to cautiously move once again down the moonstone path. However, this time, my hands were drawn up into two trembling fists. I was aware that my teeth had pulled back from my lips in an animalistic snarl. Was I becoming a savage? I guess that in desperate times…people will do desperate things. I was

prepared to attack whatever was stalking me and rip at it with my claws and teeth.

The sound came again. Once again, it was from my right. Only this time…it was much closer. Too close! I stopped. My fear was starting to turn into anger. Was it the Dar-koth? Was he playing with me like a cat plays with a mouse?

"Come on out!" I roared into the night. I was afraid and yet ashamed of my fear. I wanted to face this strangeness head on and battle it to the death. I wanted for this madness to end…one way or the other.

It was at the last second that I realized that I heard the steady sound of running footsteps and breaking branches…from behind me! I tried to turn and face whatever danger was lurking there….be it human or demon. Instead, I was tackled at the last second. A large heavy form toppled me into the wet leaves and lay with a crushing weight on top of me. I struggled to free myself from almost certain death. The Dar-koth! He had found me! I was as good as dead. I wondered if I would die quickly….or slow and painfully. Strangely enough, my last thoughts before I blacked out were that I would never again enjoy warm, delicious chocolate chip cookies. Then…the darkness took hold of my mind and I sank into sweet oblivion.

I awoke in darkness. I was lying on some cold, hard surface which gritted itself into my face. Frantic, I tried to stand. I realized that I was bound with something….rope, wire, vines….I couldn't say. I only knew that I was captured. The Dar-koth had won.

"You workin' for him?" a voice slithered through the darkness like some obscene snake awakening from the clutches of winter's grasp.

My breath caught in my throat. It didn't sound like the sinister creature that was pursuing me. My

struggles increased as I tried to sit up and get my bearings in this confusion. Something…a large stick perhaps…poked me in the back making me wince in pain.

"Don't try to get up," the voice growled, "That is…unless you want some bruised kidneys. Just answer the dang question. Are you workin' for him?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" I said as the pain started to subside.

The voice started to chuckle. It wasn't a pleasant laugh. It was hard and bitter and full of grit.

"Don't lie to me stranger," it retorted, "I know that you have been around him. You stink of that creature. I can smell it."

That creature? Did he mean the…

"Wait!" I yelled out in surprise, "Do you mean the crazy man that is chasing me? Those women back there called it a…Dark something…Dark-oath….Dark-swoth…."

"The Dar-koth," the man (because it was obviously a man's voice) answered me, "That creature is called the Dar-koth. It is a demon…a mountain demon. Most people aren't even aware that they exist."

"That's what the women said," I started to struggle again….trying to sit up and get off of the cold floor. I still couldn't see anything except darkness.

"You spoke with the nuns?" the man asked, sounding surprised, "What did they say?"

"The nuns?" I was shocked. Is that what he thought they were? I guess that in a way they were nuns…of the Pillsbury Dough Boy.

"Yeah," the man chuckled again, although this time he sounded more amused that angry, "They are a pretty weird bunch…but they're good. And they work

for the Good. If they talked to you, they must have wanted to help you. So what happened?"

"They told me to follow the moonstone path," I answered, feeling foolish at such a childish reply, "And…and to find the hermit."

Great, I thought. Now he is going to think that I am just some crazy loon running around wild in the forest at night.

For a while, he said nothing. I had started to think that I had just imagined the whole conversation. Perhaps I was just imagining the whole thing. Instead of lying on the ground in the middle of the Eastern Kentucky woods at night, I was in some padded cell somewhere, mumbling to myself about chocolate chip cookies while my wife wept at my cell's window. Could I really be crazy?

Then I felt the coldness of steel touching my wrists. Was he going to cut me….kill me?

"Wait!" I cried out, but the steel of the knife was not intended for my flesh. Instead, I felt it cut the rope which bound me. I felt the bonds loosen.

"Get up," the man growled, giving me a kick in the shins to get me moving.

I rolled over and sat up. My legs had fallen asleep. The pins and needles tingling started to set in as I rubbed some blood flow back into them. How I hated that feeling! I guess that it was better than being dead though.

I tried to look around, but the room was still completely dark. I had the feeling that we were in some sort of cave. The air was cool but not cold. I also felt the gritty floor of dirt and stones with my hands. Yes….this was definitely a cave of some sort.

Just then, a single spark lit up the darkness. In that instant, I saw the man who had captured me. He

appeared to be about 6 feet tall. He was dressed in a flannel shirt and overalls. What was most shocking about him was his beard…long and full and a dirty colored off-white. He looked like the cliché of a mountain man. I could also see that my earlier guess was right….we were in a cave of some sort. I hadn't even realized that there were caves of this size in Eastern Kentucky!

I saw that he was holding up a lighter so that he could get a better look at me. He just stared for a second and then gave a snort. I couldn't tell if it was a good thing or a bad thing. Then, he lit a cigarette and took a long drag. The glow from the end was like a small red eye that occasionally widened as he started to smoke. The lighter clicked off.

"Want one?" he asked.

"No," I replied, "Thanks anyway. Those things will kill you."

"No!" he said matter-of-factly, "The Dar-koth will kill you."

That shut me up for a minute. He was right though. I might be safe for the moment….I hoped….but the Dar-koth was sure to find me. How was I ever to escape a demon?

For a long time, we just sat there. He smoked while I tried to calm down my jangled nerves. I didn't think that this man was dangerous. Finally, I got up enough courage to ask the question that was burning inside my brain.

"Ummmm," I stammered, "Sir….are you? Are you the hermit?"

The cigarette glowed brightly one last time and then fell to the cave's floor. It vanished underneath what I assumed was his foot. Once again, the lighter clicked on. This time, he used it to light some sort of

torch that was attached to the wall with a wad of what appeared to be clay mud. The light was oily, smoky, and gave off a stench. However, it was light. And any light was great after being in darkness for so long.

The man looked at me for the longest time. He seemed to be going over something in his mind.

"I have lived in these woods for twenty-three years," he finally spoke, "I keep to myself, mostly. I go into town about twice a year. I don't really cotton to a lot of people. Does that make me a hermit?"

"Ummmm," I tried to think of a good reply.

"I live in a cave in the middle of the forest," he continued, "I've never married and I don't have any kids. I don't have a job, except for cuttin' down trees for wood, digging ginseng, and growing a few sorry vegetables in a little patch I cleared out. Does that make me a hermit?"

"Aahhhhh," my eyes shifted to the floor.

"I don't like people," he started in again, "People are trouble. I don't like you! YOU are TROUBLE! You've come pokin' around my house….bringing that THING with you! I don't care for things like that? Do you understand? Does that make me a hermit?"

"Well….." I didn't know what to say.

He finally stopped his ranting. Instead he rushed over to a little niche and pulled out something covered in an old dirty cloth. It looked like a shotgun that was covered up to protect it. Was he going to shoot me? I started to back away.

"Well….I guess that all of those things DO make me a hermit," the man started to laugh suddenly. It was a cold laugh though. I felt goosebumps rise up on my arms.

"And if what you say is right," he continued, "If the Dar-koth is after you….if the sisters tried to help you…..if they told you to find me…."

He stopped to unwrap the cloth from around what he was holding in his hands. I could see right away that it wasn't a shotgun.

Looking into my eyes, he nodded, "Yep….I guess that you can say that you found the hermit. And I'm a guessin' that you are probably gonna' need this as well."

In his hands, he was holding a silver axe. I stared it. It glimmered in the dirty light of the torch. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Then, I remembered that the oracle had spoken of such an instrument. It had stated that I would indeed find a silver axe.

"I have two questions," I said, as I took the axe from the hands of the hermit and examined it closely, "First of all, how did you get such a thing as a silver axe? Second, how in the world did you know that I needed this?"

The man chuckled, "I've had this axe for years. It was handed down to me by my dad. He got it from his dad…who got it from his dad…and so on. You know how those things go. I guess that this axe has been in our family for generations. It came all the way from Germany!"

It amazed me that the man was still in possession of such a valuable item. I was even more amazed that he had just handed it to me without even asking if I needed it.

"I almost sold it once," the hermit was looking down at the floor, "I was in a bad place in my life…and I needed the money. But one of the nuns….Marianne….came to me right before I was fixing to leave and sell it. She asked me not to sell it….said that it would be needed…"

"So I guess that you listened to her?" I smiled.

"Well, duh…." the hermit said, "If I hadn't then you wouldn't be holding the thing…now would you? Plus, it helped that she was able to give me some money. I usually don't take charity…and she knew that. She said that it wasn't charity….that it was a payment. She was paying me to keep this axe until the day that it would be needed."

"So how did you know that I needed this axe?" I was confused as I asked this question.

"Marianne said that a man would come wandering around in the forest looking for me," the hermit said, "She said, 'Charlie, you keep this axe until that man gets here. He is really gonna need it.' So I kept it….and here it is. You can have it for all that I'm concerned. Marianne paid for it long, long ago."

The cold heaviness of the axe felt good in my hands. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do with it though.

"Am I supposed to kill the Dar-koth with this?" I asked.

Charlie, for I had picked up the hermit's name from his conversation, began to laugh, "NO! No way man! It would take more than a silver axe to kill that thing. It isn't actually alive…like you and me. It's gonna take something more to get rid of that demon. Believe me…I know. I've been trying to kill it for twenty years."

I sat down on the ground and examined the axe closely. It was carved with strange symbols that I could not read. Little squiggles were carved into the handle. They seemed to move with a power of their own in the flickering firelight.

Charlie crouched down beside me, "Hey there man. Sorry to burst your bubble. But if the Dar-koth

is really after you then there isn't much you can do. I've heard that thing tracking its victims in the woods. It never fails. I'm just lucky that I haven't been tracked down as of yet….and I can thank the sisters for that. They can really work some strong magic up there in that little hut of theirs….and they've kept me safe all these long years. I don't think that I can ever pay them back."

"But I'm not gonna die for anybody," he continued, standing up again, "If that creature is really after you, then you're gonna have to get the heck out of here. I don't want it to come snooping around where I sleep. I don't want to start messing with that thing right now….not after all these years."

I was stunned. Was he really sending me back out into the forest? Didn't he care if I lived or died? I felt numb. My mind was whirling as I tried to remember what the oracle had said. I could remember the part about the hermit…I had found him. I could also remember that I was going to be getting a silver axe….and now I had it. What was the third part? Something about….about….

"Twins!" I shouted, jumping up and waving the axe around like a madman.

Charlie, the hermit, jumped back as the axe whizzed past his beard, threatening a shave. He looked at me like I was crazy (and I still wasn't entirely sure that I wasn't) and snorted, "Twins…what in tarnation are you talkin' about boy? There ain't no children around these parts."

"But that is what the oracle told me!" I was pacing around wildly, "It said that I would find a hermit….you….and that I would get a silver axe. It also said that I would find the twins….and that they were

imprisoned. Do you think that there are some twins who are being kept locked up….trapped?"

Charlie's eyes glazed over, and he seemed lost in deep thought. Then I saw him give a shiver. His eyes widened as he stared at me.

"I know what the silver axe is for!" he wheezed suddenly, "It isn't for the Dar-koth! But if you don't use it, you can never defeat the Dar-koth!"

I had no idea what he meant, but goose bumps broke out on my arms.

"Follow me," he said, walking out of the cave.

The night moved around us, an entity that longed to reach out and strangle but lacked the viscosity to do so. I followed Charlie, the hermit, as he trudged knowingly through the labyrinth of the Eastern Kentucky woods. Although he was real enough, he moved with such swiftness and ease that at times I wondered if I was following a ghost instead of an actual person. He seemed to float with ease across the wooded terrain while I stumbled along clumsily with each foot snagging roots and briars. Still clutching the silver axe, I startled at each sound…jumped at each moving branch.

"Where are we going?" I hissed through gritted teeth, tripping on some hidden branch which lay beneath the thick shag carpet of leaves.

Charlie didn't speak. He only held up one finger that shouted volumes. I was to follow. I was to listen. I was not to speak. I held my tongue and continued my hitching pace.

After what seemed like hours (but was probably only 30 minutes), we suddenly stopped. Charlie turned to me, his eyes wide and a finger placed dramatically over his clenched lips. With his other hand, he pointed toward a large hole that had been burrowed into the

ground. The width of the hole appeared to be at least 20 feet in diameter. Enormous! I was wondering silently what could have made such a deep hole when a load snort filled the air around us. With a low whoosh, a foul stench erupted from the hole and attacked my senses. My eyes watered. My nose ran. My mouth puckered.

Leaning in close, Charlie whispered, "It's asleep. We're in luck."

"What….*hack*….what in the world is making that **awful** smell," I gagged back at him. Another snort had sounded, and I knew that the foul order would soon return.

"Don't you recognize snores when you hear them?" Charlie looked amused, although I could tell that the smell was getting to him as well. His eyes were starting to turn red and puffy.

"Snores?" I asked, pondering what could be making such loud noises in its sleep.

"Sure," Charlie grinned, "Do you know how I told you that your axe couldn't kill the Dar-koth?"

I nodded.

"Well," Charlie said, "There is something in that hole that can kill anything….even a powerful demon like the Dar-koth. She is called Morvion….and she is asleep. Like I said, we are in luck."

"Why?" I asked again.

"Because now you can kill it!" Charlie hissed again, "It's the only way that you are ever going to defeat the Dar-koth! Now come on…follow me!"

I didn't get a chance to ask him how in the world killing some other creature was going to help me defeat the evil which was following me through the night. I didn't have time. He took off at a mad dash toward the large, stinking hole that existed like a cancer on the

face of the earth. This was all so unnatural….so ethereal…and yet, I felt compelled to run after him. I sure didn't want to be left alone and helpless in the forest…..easy prey for the Dar-koth. I saw Charlie disappear into the hole in front of me.

"Wait up!" I tried to say in an urgent but low voice, "Don't run so fast. I can't keep up!"

I silently cursed myself for getting into this mess. I remembered that all of this had started over a bag of chocolate chip cookies. Why hadn't I just gone to bed instead? At least I would have been safe…asleep with my dreams. Even nightmares wouldn't have been as bad.

The dirt was fresh and my feet sank deep into it. The stench was worse now that I was closer. I could actually feel the wind….the rancid breath of the thing….blowing across my skin. It was hot, making me feel as though I were blistering. I knew that if I stayed here much longer that I would suffer burns. I could feel my flesh starting to cook.

Stumbling onward, I once again found myself in a darkness which should only exist in the grave. In the back of my mind, I realized how much like a grave this was. The dirt was fresh. The smell was horrific. And I was terrified out of my mind. Perhaps I was already dead and this was just the result of the last few electrical burps inside my brain. Would all of this fade into nothingness as the rest of my brain went into eternal sleep? Was there no light at the end of the tunnel?

"Stop it!" I muttered to myself. Surely if I were already dead then I would know about it. After all…Ghost Whisperer was one of my favorite shows. I knew that if I were truly dead that help was just one

step away….one lovely, well-endowed medium's gentle smile away.

My mind was whisked away from my fantasy of Jennifer Love Hewitt as I noticed a faint glow up ahead. It was a dim, pulsing light that somehow seemed worse than the darkness. As I continued to trudge down the tunnel of doom, the light grew stronger…although it was still weak.

As I rounded the curve, Charlie leapt toward me and forced his hand over my mouth. It was a blessing that he did so, for I would have surely awoken the monstrosity with my screams if he had not. My eyes nearly popped from my head as my screams of terror erupted into Charlie's dirty hand instead of the dank, smelly air. My mind ached painfully as it tried to absorb what I was seeing.

The creature…the one that Charlie had called Morvion…appeared to be a cross between a giant spider, an earthworm, and a snake. The body was long, thick and large. It glistened in the darkness with a wormlike sliminess that made my stomach lurch uncomfortably…wanting to spill its contents in a violent vomit eruption. Sprouting from this root of a body grew eight long hairy legs that twitched as the creature slept. Pincers at the end of each leg opened and closed with spasmodic urgency. I could hear them clicking in the still air of the tunnel.

The worst trait however was the fact that this thing had two heads! Each head was long and snakelike. In fact, both heads looked like they belonged on a rattlesnake. That is…if the rattlesnakes were about twenty times their normal size. Each head was cocked at an unnatural position. One head was inhaling and making the snorts which had echoed to our ears outside of the tunnel. It appeared that the

other head was the one in charge of exhaling. It continued to blurt and wheeze out volumes of foul air that filled the tunnel with the scent of rot and decay.

The most amazing part of the beast was the fact that its entire body seemed to be glowing. The faint pulsing red light that was illuminating the darkness was coming from its body. It was as if the very heart of the creature was made of fire and was burning within its unholy entrails.

Charlie didn't speak this time. Instead he pointed to the silver axe which was still clutched in my sweaty palms and then pointed to the Morvion. He then made a slicing motion across his throat…not once but twice. He wanted me to kill it. He wanted me to slay this monster…a true dragon…which lay sleeping before me.

Although fear clutched at my feet, wanting to stay me from my task, I knew that I had to do it. I had to kill this unnatural being and wipe it from the face of the earth. It was as if every fiber in my body was tingling….buzzing with electricity.

I stepped closer. I could feel the heat of the dragon as it slept…unaware of its approaching demise. The silver axe began to tremble in my hands. Was it the actual metal….or was it my own flesh….that trembled? I wondered such as I continued to inch closer to the monster.

It was at that moment that I noticed the children. At first I thought that I was seeing double…or into a mirror. Each child was a perfect match of the other. Straight blonde hair…pale skin….thin…..with ragged clothes and large, watchful eyes. I stared at them….and they stared back. And then…..their mouths opened.

Suddenly a loud screech erupted from their lips. I dropped the axe as my hands clasped over my throbbing ears. I wanted to scream…but the breath

seemed to have been ripped right from my chest. I turned to seek out Charlie, but he was writhing on the ground and was clawing at his own ears. I turned back.

The children were standing perfectly still. Their large round eyes were still fixed eerily upon me. It was then that it popped into my head. They had to be the twins of whom the oracle had spoken! I had found another piece of the puzzle!

Just then, I heard a low grumble. My heart stopped cold as I turned my eyes to the Morvion. It was awake. Each head was staring at me with cold, dead eyes. In their reflection, I could see my own death! With a loud hiss, one of the heads flew toward me….fangs glistening and dripping with a foaming poison. It was too late to escape!

"Jump!" Charlie yelled as the Morvion lunged to kill me with one agonizing, poison-filled bite. Somehow, his voice penetrated my mind which had otherwise been petrified with fear. Although my mind remained almost unresponsive in its panic, my body still had the desire to live. With a great leap, I flung myself out of the way. Instead of finding purchase in my flesh, the Morvion's great fangs instead sank deep into the soft soil.

"Look out!" I heard Charlie's voice behind me. I turned just in time to see the other head making a strike toward me. I still was repulsed at the snakelike quality of this monster. How could something like this even exist? Of course, there were a lot of strange things on the earth that I hadn't been aware of before tonight. What else would make itself known to me before this nightmare was over? I didn't have time to ponder on it...and I didn't really want to!

I rolled quickly to the left, again dodging certain death from the fangs of the giant Morvion. In the background, the terrible duo…the twins….had stopped

their screeching. Had they been set as warning signals for the terrible beast? Where had they even come from?

Just then, a large rock came whizzing by my left ear. I turned to see Charlie pitching rocks at the creature.

"I'll try to distract the heads!" he shouted, "You know what to do!"

I looked down at the silver axe which trembled in my hands. It was almost like the axe wanted to sink itself in the body of the abomination which lay before me. I ran behind the creature as it turned its attention to Charlie and his rocks.

The head on the left made a lunge for Charlie. He quickly chucked a rock at its face, hitting it right between its eyes. It made an enraged hiss of pain and quickly writhed its long neck away. This, of course, put it right in front of me. Now was the perfect time to strike…if I could find the courage to do so.

Suddenly the axe took on a life of its own. Seemingly without any help from me at all…except to hold the thing…the axe whistled through the air. I felt the blade sink sweetly into the neck of the Morvion's first head. There was no resistance…not even when it met bone. With a loud "plop", the first head fell neatly to the floor of the tunnel, leaving a writhing, bloody stump.

The Morvion's other head gave a confused gurgle and then took a long look at the place where the first head used to be. Then, with a great roar of rage and pain, the Morvion turned its attention to me once again. I felt the blood chill inside my veins. It wasn't going to let me have the chance to attack it again. How was I going to kill the thing?

The second head lunged. Quickly, I ran under it as it approached. I felt the scales rub against my back.

Instantly, it started to burn and I could feel the warm wetness of blood dripping down my sides. Somehow I knew that it was as if I had brushed up against a stack of knives….I had been skinned deeply down my back.

I turned my head just in time to see the Morvion circle back. It came at me with enormous speed. My blood was the only thing that would quench the fire of revenge which burned inside the beast's heart. There wasn't any time to dodge this time. In desperation, I threw my hands up in the air and closed my eyes. I hoped that my death would be quick and relatively painless.

I felt the axe quiver once again and heard the same low "plop" as before. Just then, I heard Charlie let out a yelp of surprise and joy from behind me. I opened my eyes and saw the Morvion flopping around on the floor in front of me. Its second head had been severed from its body. I was in shock. How had this happened?

"That was great!" Charlie came up and smacked me on the back, "How did you manage to kill that thing so quickly?"

"Luck?" I answered shakily. However, I knew that it was more than that. It was the axe. Somehow, it had guided itself to kill the Morvion. Now that the beast was dead, the axe lay still in my hands. I knew that it would never come to life again. It had fulfilled its destiny. Now it would rest forever more.

Charlie was walking slowly toward the twins. They had remained mysteriously silent once they had awoken the beast, Morvion. Now it appeared as though they were losing their ability to stand. As I watched with horrific fascination, the twins slowly began to sink into the floor. Charlie put out his hand and swiped it across one of them. It came away covered in dirt.

"Mud!" he exclaimed, "These aren't real children at all. They are made of mud! Golems! That is what they are….true live golems."

"Golems?" I asked, puzzled once again.

"Creatures made of the earth," Charlie said with amazement still seasoning his voice, "These children were made of mud. The creature Morvion must have used some of its terrible magic to give them life. Most golems have simple tasks. I guess that their task was to warn it of intruders while it slept."

"Well, they did a pretty good job," I said, watching as the once sharp features of the twins melted into piles of gooey mud.

"Not now though," Charlie kicked one of them over. Now it was just a shapeless pile of dirt.

"The Morvion is dead, thanks to you," he continued, "It has no more power. Now that power belongs to you…if you dare take it."

"What do you mean?" I asked. For some reason, I was clutching the silver axe even tighter.

Charlie turned and pointed to the Morvion's now-motionless body. Its chest still glowed with an unnatural, unearthly light.

"Cut there," he said, "Cut into the creature's chest. You will find….something amazing."

As though I were in a trance, I stumbled clumsily toward the dead beast. Every fiber in my body was screaming out that I should just leave….run away….leave this terrible grave. But my body had other things in mind. I raised the silver axe above my head and swung it toward the chest of the Morvion. It sank deep into the dead flesh with a sickening slurp. I yanked it back out…covered with the black blood of the beast.

"It's in there!" Charlie pointed, his voice dropping to a whisper. "I can't get it for you. You have to reach in yourself."

I dropped to the dirt floor and reached toward the oozing hole that I had cut in the monster's chest. A dark red glow was coming from within. Then I stopped….was I really going to do this? Was I going to stick my hand inside this beast? What would I find?

"Go on!" Charlie hissed. I turned toward him. In the flickering light, his eyes looked like those of a madman.

I hesitated.

The Morvion was dead. I had slain this dragonish beast with the use of the silver axe which Charlie, the hermit, had given me. Now the Morvion lay at my feet.

I knew what I had to do. Black blood seeped gently from the wound, although the beast was obviously dead and had no heart function. I took a deep breath and plunged my hand inside.

A million needles of pain instantly jabbed into my flesh, making me scream in agony.

"Don't pull your hand out without the object of power!" Charlie was yelling, "It's the only way! You'll never have the nerve to try again!"

I knew that he was right. It felt like acid was eating away at my flesh, but I also knew that this was the only way the nightmare was going to end. I don't know how I knew this. It was like I was receiving radio signals or something. I just *knew*. According to Charlie, this was the only way to kill the Dar-koth. If only I hadn't had that craving for chocolate chip cookies! I cursed myself under my breath for my chocolate weakness.

In the warmth and severity of the dead beast's flesh and blood, my fingers suddenly encountered a

cold hardness. I wrapped my burning fingers around it and pulled. It didn't come easy. It was wrapped in flesh…tendons…nerves. I yanked harder and felt it tear away from its prison of meat. I was victorious!

Pulling the object out of the hole, my hand instantly stopped burning. Instead, I began to feel better than I had ever felt before. I wiped away the blood and gore from the object and found that I was holding…

"A ruby," Charlie was standing beside me, "Isn't she a beauty?"

"This?" I asked, holding the red jewel up so that it reflected in the light of the flickering torches, "This is what is going to kill the Dar-koth?"

"Man! It's not just a normal ruby," Charlie spat at me vehemently, "Can't you feel it? It has a power."

I had to agree with Charlie on this. I could feel the power of the stone. It had stopped the pain in my hand. A pleasant warmth and strength was radiating up from my hand and into my arm. I was suddenly feeling much stronger and less anxious. Indeed, this was the best that I had felt all night. Maybe everything was going to be alright after all!

"There's just one more thing we need to do," Charlie said, his eyes never leaving the ruby.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Find the Dar-koth," Charlie looked into my eyes with a burning gaze that seemed to be fueled by insanity, "We've got to find him and kill him."

He motioned for me to start back out of the tunnel. I happily obliged. With the ruby in my possession, I felt like I could take on the world. Also, I wanted to be out of this grave of a tunnel which now stank of the Morvion's blood and death fumes. It didn't seem possible, but it appeared as though the creature

was rotting away before our very eyes. I watched as one of its heads collapsed in on itself in a sea of boiling maggots. I felt bile rise into my throat. I wanted to get out of here as fast as I could.

As we approached the end of the tunnel, I could feel the rush of the cool night air on my face. After the stench of the Morvion's lair, the breeze held a sweetness that made me instantly break into a merry smile. After all of the madness, everything suddenly felt like it was going to be okay.

Just then, my world went black in an explosion of pain. Something had hit me from behind. Stumbling, I turned to see Charlie, raising a rock above his head. He was grinning that crazy grin again. I raised my arms and tried to block him, but it was too late. He knocked me to the ground.

For a few minutes, everything was black. I wasn't entirely unconscious though. I was aware that Charlie was standing beside me. I couldn't see him, but I could smell him. His stink was overwhelming. I waited, helpless, for him to finish me off.

"I'm not gonna' kill ya'" Charlie was cackling down at me, "That is for Him to do….the Dar-koth. I just want this one little thing…."

I heard the rustle of his pants as he bent over me. His fingers, rough from years of living in the woods, forced my hand open and quickly snatched away the ruby.

"Twenty years!" Charlie was laughing again, "I've looked for this dratted thing for twenty years….and it took you one night. One dang night! But it doesn't matter. It's mine now…..mine! Just like He said it would be."

He? I thought to myself, Does that mean he was working for…

"Yeah," Charlie was standing over me again, "The Dar-koth came to me years ago…right after I tried to sell that axe. I was getting ready to quit…to leave. But he promised me…this….lovely jewel of power. If I would help him that is…if I would help him…get you!"

Why me? I thought, *What's so special about me?*

"Why…." I managed to mutter from my dry lips. My vision was coming back…but everything was spinning. I saw Charlie's wild face whirling above me.

"I don't know, stranger," Charlie was gazing at the ruby that he now clutched in his fingers, "And I don't really care. I got what I wanted….and soon He will get what He wants….."

Charlie stood up and took out an object from his pocket. It winked in the moonlight, and I saw that it was a little silver whistle. He placed it between his lips and blew. A sharp squeal pierced into my brain, making me wince in pain. It was like a wasp was burrowing into my ear.

Charlie stopped and looked down at me, "Sorry about all this. It's just that I've been looking for this ruby for twenty years….and now I'll get what's coming to me. They'll pay….they'll all pay."

I didn't know what in the world this crazy man was babbling about. All that I knew what that my time was almost up. I knew deep down inside that he had just summoned the creature which had been chasing me the entire night….the Dar-koth!

I closed my eyes and tried to come up with a plan. I was lying on the ground, shaking with pain and fear. Charlie had the ruby…he had been using me all along. Why hadn't the oracle warned me? Now, the Dar-koth was on his way. My night was about over…but not in the way that I had expected.

Charlie stood a few feet away from me. He had put the silver whistle in his shirt pocket…the silver whistle that he had used to call the Dar-koth.

"He gave that to me many years ago," Charlie smirked, holding up the ruby in the moonlight and staring intently into its flaming center, "He hates that whistle….despises it. It makes His ears ring like crazy. But He said to use it…whenever I found the ruby…and had you to deliver to Him."

"Why?" I managed to croak out again, "Why are you doing this?"

"WHY?" Charlie was a madman, ranting and waving his arms in the air, "WHY? Because for twenty years of my life, I searched for this ruby….this object of power. This little jewel is going to help make all of my dreams come true! And if the price of that is your blood…then so be it!"

Just then something came whistling through the air, striking Charlie on the forehead and making him sink slowly to the ground…a flabbergasted look on his face. I saw that it was a stone…a small white stone just like the one on the moonstone path! I scooted up in a sitting position, my head screaming with agony. I looked toward the nearby bushes just in time to see…

"Marianne!" I nearly shouted with joy….it was so good to see a somewhat friendly face.

She ran over to me. Her once white garments had been streaked with mud and a darker substance which I thought might be blood. She grimaced when she saw the condition that I was in.

"Can you stand?" she asked, concerned.

I nodded and stood shakily to my feet. She grabbed my hand and began to pull me toward the bushes.

"We can't stay here," she said, "The Dar-koth….he is on his way. We tried to hold him back at the Abbey for a long time. He was just so powerful. All of the other sisters are gone…dead. A few ran away. I only hope that they find a way to live through this nightmare."

She looked at me with a hint of disgust in her eyes. Did she blame me for bringing this horror to her part of the woods?

"You killed it….didn't you?" she asked bitterly.

"What?" I asked, dumbfounded.

"The Morvion," she asked again, "You stink of it….you killed it…didn't you?"

I nodded my head as we made it to the bushes. She pushed me into the thicket and followed closely behind, prodding me deeper and deeper into a darker part of the forest.

"I can't believe it," she was muttering behind me, "It was so well hidden. It was impossible to find…of course that's why they needed you. And I CAN'T believe that Charlie was working with him all along. If only the Oracle had spoken of this…had given a warning."

Finally I had enough of the confusion of words which were pouring from her mouth, like tokens spilling from some crazy slot machine from Hell. I stopped marching forward and whirled around to face her.

"Listen up!" I nearly yelled, even though my head threatened to spill my brains onto the ground in a messy plop with the exertion, "So far tonight I have been chased by a demon, been sheltered by a group of crazy nuns who worship the Pillsbury Dough Boy, been sent on a mission along a path of glowing rocks, been attacked by a crazy hermit, and have killed some sort of mutant snake creature with a glowing ruby in its chest. Now here you are…showing up and muttering nonsense

behind me. I'm not going another step until you tell me what in the world is going on!"

"But the Dar-koth…he's on his way!" she cried, "He'll find you for sure if we don't make haste and find a hiding place."

I didn't budge. I just stared at her. Finally she sighed, her shoulders slumping slightly.

"All right….fine," she said, looking up at me again. Her eyes were shining brightly in the moonlight that had appeared since the clouds from the passing shower had floated out of the sky and into oblivion.

"Just listen and learn. All of the things that you are seeing tonight…they haven't registered to you before…have they?" she asked.

I shook my head in response.

"Just as I thought," she continued, "But listen to me…it is no coincidence that you were able to find this place that most people just can't seem to see. You have a gift…you are a Finder. You have been blessed by the Great Baker above…I guess that you would call him God."

"Now hold on for a second…" I stammered, trying to register what she was saying, but she held up her hand, silencing me.

"Just think about it!" she continued, "All of your life…have you been good at finding things….things that were lost…things that other people couldn't find?"

I looked down at the ground and thought about it. Suddenly it all started to make sense. There had been so many times….I had been able to find lost keys…lost wallets….lost scissors….even lost socks. People had even had me look for lost things around their houses. It was just a little knack that I had…nothing special…and yet. I looked up at Marianne in amazement.

"Just last summer," I whispered, "The Smith family down the road…their little boy…only two years old. He wandered away from their house….got lost in the woods. He was gone for hours….people looking for him….dogs….nobody could find him…."

"But you found him, didn't you?" she said, staring deeply into my eyes, "You were able to find him?"

"Yes!" I said, "But it isn't a power…it's just a knack I have…I'm just lucky…that's all. I just happened to walk into the woods and….there the little fellow was. He was asleep beside a big, old oak tree. Anyone could have found him."

"But they didn't!" she said, "YOU are the one who found him. If it hadn't been for you…he might never have been found."

A chill ran up my spine. I remembered how happy everyone had been….everyone had been clapping and cheering for me. I also remembered how about half of the people in the search party said that they had walked past that same oak tree about ten times….but they had never seen the little boy. At the time, I hadn't thought about it much…but now.

"So you are trying to say that I'm some sort of human bloodhound?" I asked.

"Not really," she smiled at me, "A bloodhound only finds things that it is sent to track. Finders are very special people….and very rare. Your gift is that you are able to find things….almost anything that people may have lost….or can't find."

"So I'm one of these Finders?" I asked again.

Marianne nodded, "And the Dar-koth has been using you all along."

"What do you mean?" I asked, "Charlie was the one who was using me. He was using me to find that ruby that he had been searching for."

Marianne shook her head, “Charlie was misled. The Dar-koth isn’t going to let him keep that ruby. It is a power that can…that can defeat him. I don’t think that he is going to let Charlie keep it. He was using you to find it…that’s all. Now, he is intent on getting that ruby….and killing you!”

“Killing me!” I yelled out, “But if he has the ruby….why does he want to kill me?”

“I told you…Finders are rare,” Marianne said, “In fact, you may be the only one alive on the whole planet at the moment. You are the one who found the object that can destroy the Dar-koth….and you would be the only one who could find something to destroy him. Like I said before….that is your gift…you are a Finder.”

Just then a scream of terror and pain rang out in the night. It was Charlie. He didn’t sound like he was enjoying the power of the ruby. It sounded like….

“He’s getting what’s coming to him,” I winced again as the sounds of his screams got louder, “Just like he said he would.”

Charlie’s screams continued to ring out into the night. They were terrible and full of pain. Marianne and I hurried along, hidden by the bushes and trees in the night forest. We knew that we could do little to help him, but we were going to see if we could try. I was hesitant at first, but Marianne was more adamant about it. She remembered a kinder, gentler Charlie.

“He’s a good man,” she had said to me, standing in the moonlight as the trees dripped their nightly collection of dewy moisture on our heads, “He’s just gone astray.”

“I’ll say,” I confirmed, rubbing my head where Charlie had struck me with a rock not half an hour ago.

Marianne took my hands in hers, "Listen to me…we are all loaves in the Great Baker's oven. Some of us just aren't as done as others."

As crazy as that sounded, it did make sense to me. Who was I to judge? Besides, I didn't think that Charlie was going to make it. As we grew nearer, Charlie's cries took on a wet, strangled sound and suddenly stopped.

"I fear the worst for that man," Marianne said, slowing to a stop.

I peered out from behind the large maple tree I was hiding behind. There was no sign of Charlie…or the Dar-koth…anywhere. I looked over at Marianne, but she seemed clueless as to what to do. I wondered quietly if I should just grab her by the hand and try to make it back to the highway. Perhaps we could flag down a passing car…or make it to the little BP station out on Route 80.

I stepped out from behind the tree. The moonlight was growing weaker. I knew that it would be dawn soon…the sun would rise and put an end to this darkness. There was something comforting about it…but in a way, there was something still biting into the back of my brain. Then, it hit me! The Oracle had spoken of the dawn….it had stated that I had to defeat the Dar-koth before dawn or I would lose my soul. I didn't really know how that could happen…but the Oracle had been right about everything else. Even if it had been a little misguided.

I turned to motion to Marianne to come on out. Just as I turned, however, something crashed through the underbrush and came rolling out to my feet. As it stopped its crazy, loping roll, I saw with horror that it was Charlie's head. The eyes, dead and glazed, stared up at me. The mouth flew open and a slow scream

started coming out of the thing's mouth….joined soon by my own screams. I backed away from the obscenity and turned to flee….and there before me stood the Dar-koth.

I hadn't seen him since hours earlier when I had stopped to pick him up from beside the road. I had been trying to be nice to a stranger in a rainstorm. He had had something completely different in mind. Now…as I stared at him in a different light….I saw that he was indeed a monster.

He was still sporting an empty socket…his missing eye was just a gaping hole. His other eye, however, glowed with a deep red fire that pierced my soul. His nostrils flared as he breathed in the scent of the night air…tainted with my fear. His mouth was open in a wide grin that was filled with what appeared to be rows and rows of teeth…sharp (of course) and glittering in the approaching light of dawn. He was dressed all in black…his clothing bulging at the muscles underneath. His very body seemed to be growing before my eyes….he was getting stronger….and I knew the reason why.

I saw that he held the ruby that I had taken from the Morvion. It was clutched in his left hand….his black claws curled neatly around the glowing jewel. The ruby throbbed like a heart. With each throb, the Dar-koth appeared to gain more and more strength.

"Now…human," he snarled, yellow foam dripping from his black lips, "We end this nonsense. As a thank you for finding the ruby of power…your death will be quick and painless. Unlike our friend over there….mwa ha ha ha!"

"You fiend!" Marianne came storming out of the bushes, her robes rippling behind her as she ran toward the Dar-koth, "I'll….I'll kill you! You evil

creature of darkness….let the power of the Great Baker stop you!"

Marianne was clutching a little figure of the Pillsbury Dough Boy in her hand. I was mesmerized to see that it started to glow with a fierce white light that caused the Dar-koth to screech out and cover his eyes. Marianne looked triumphant as she neared the demon.

"Back to Hell where you came from!" she cried out, pushing the Dough Boy closer to the slithering terror which had stalked me the entire night.

For a second, it seemed like it was going to work….but then, the ruby flashed fiercely. As it flashed, it seemed to give the Dar-koth even more strength. He stopped his screeching and took his clawed hand away from his eye. His mouth broke out into a grin. The ruby flashed and throbbed once more.

"Little fool," he whispered hoarsely to Marianne, "Your God of the Grain has no power over me….as long as I have the ruby."

Marianne looked puzzled and pushed the little statue of the Pillsbury Dough Boy even closer. The Dar-koth grabbed hold of her hand and squeezed…making her scream out in pain as he pulverized the bones in her hand…and the statue along with it. Her screams were short-lived though as he brought his other clawed hand whistling through the air and ripped her head from her shoulders. It went sailing into the sky and disappeared behind the bushes where we had been hiding moments before.

"Noooo!" I yelled out as her headless body, gushing dark blood and other liquids, slumped slowly into the leaves.

I fell to my knees. It was over. I knew that the Dar-koth would kill me next.

My mind was racing. Everything was happening so quickly now. In the last few moments, I had seen Charlie….dead. I had seen Marianne killed by the demon, Dar-koth. And now…he was preparing to finish me off at last. My night quest for chocolate chip cookies was about to end.

"Little human," the Dar-koth was slowly walking toward me. I noticed that the leaves were turning brown and starting to smoke as he advanced.

"You have proven most useful," he was laughing, "Your powers as a Finder are truly remarkable. However, you have used them for the last time."

Marianne had spoken of me being a Finder. She had said that I had the power to find things that other people could not. Had that been the reason behind this entire night of horror? I was just a tool to help the Dar-koth find the ruby of power that he now possessed. The same ruby had helped him to defeat Marianne so quickly….to kill her. Now it was my turn. I looked up to face my death. The Dar-koth was almost upon me….he was walking slowly….savoring his victory.

Suddenly, I grew angry. This entire night, I had been used. I had been betrayed. I had been hunted like some animal. I wasn't going to just sit and be killed like an animal though. I was going to fight.

"Noooo!" I yelled with as much ire that I could manage. I rolled quickly to my right and dove for a set of bushes which would provide me some cover.

As soon as I was in the bushes, I jumped up and ran. At first, I just wanted to get away…as far away as possible. But I knew that I would never be able to run away from the terrible horror which hunted me. I had to find a way to defeat him.

Behind me, a terrible roar rang out in the pre-dawn air. It seems that I had taken the Dar-koth by

surprise. I guess that he didn't think that I would run…fight back. *Good*, I thought to myself, *let him be surprised for a change*.

I heard the sound of breaking limbs and snapping branches as the Dar-koth started to tear after me. I was running blind. I had to get to a place and think. I had to…

Just then, a sharp burning pain seared itself down the back of my right leg. I screamed in agony and fell to the ground. I clutched my leg and felt a warmth there…wet. I brought my hand back to my face to find that my hand was covered in blood. I looked up….there was the Dar-koth. Somehow, he had caught up with me….had slashed my leg.

"How…" I started to ask…and then I remembered, "The ruby…"

"Yes, little man," the Dar-koth held up the jewel. It flashed brightly like a heart.

"This ruby gives me power even greater than I had imagined," the Dar-koth was staring at the jewel, enraptured by it, "With this in my possession, nothing can stop me. NOTHING!"

My leg was a burning pillar of fire. I couldn't run anymore. He had seen to that. I was helpless….or was I?

If I am truly a Finder…let me find something that will help me now, I thought to myself. My fingers started digging into the leaves and soil around me….I was desperate.

The Dar-koth finally broke his gaze away from the jewel and turned it toward me. My heart felt like a block of ice in my burning chest. It was almost over.

"It is your time to die now," he said, starting to advance toward me again. I could see that he was bringing his clawed hand back behind him. He was

going to slash my head off…just like he had done to Charlie and Marianne. I couldn't get away in time….I couldn't run….

At that moment, my fingers brushed against something small and cold on the ground. I grabbed it and held it up. The object winked in the coming light of day. It was small….it was silver….it was a whistle! I couldn't believe it….I had found the whistle that Charlie had blown earlier to summon the Dar-koth. He must have dropped it while he was running from the demon who had eventually killed him as well. Charlie had said that the Dar-koth hated the sound.

I put the whistle to my lips and blew with all the force that I could. The air was filled with a harsh screeching sound. It was unpleasant for me…but I could see that it had a worse effect on the Dar-koth. He screamed in pain and brought both of his hands (claws and all) to his ears. He began to writhe uncontrollably. Drool started to drip from his lips, burning the ground in large spots as it fell.

I blew again and again with all my might. I was going to blow this whistle until I didn't have one ounce of breathe left in my body. I might still die…but I was going to go down fighting.

"Aarrrrgh!" the Dar-koth growled, shaking and flinging his head. I stared at the demon…noticing suddenly that he no longer had the ruby in his hand. He had dropped it! I quickly glanced to the ground around his feet. The ruby flashed at me….red fire in a dark forest.

Not stopping to think, I reached out and snatched the ruby from the ground. All at once, I began to feel that feeling that everything was going to be alright. It was like everything was happening in slow motion. My

arm started to burn…but it was pleasant…like a warm fire. The burning actually felt good.

As though on its own, my hand raised the ruby into the air. I kept blowing the whistle because it was the only thing that I knew to do. Everything else was happening on its own. As I raised the ruby into the air, it suddenly started to flash faster and faster….brighter and brighter. The Dar-koth saw that I had the ruby and his eyes grew large with fear. I knew that he wanted to run away…but the screech of the whistle was keeping him planted to the ground. He was trapped.

The ruby was continuing to flash brighter and brighter. It was so bright now that it was starting to hurt my eyes. I closed them…but kept blowing the silver whistle. I could hear the Dar-koth screaming as the ruby kept up with the flashes of light and warmth. I could feel the waves of power rushing over me….but I was protected somehow. I knew that if I hadn't been holding onto the ruby that I would have been killed instantly by the power that was forming around me at this moment.

"Nooooo!" the Dar-koth screamed out, "This can't be happening. I was so close. I was sooooooooo….."

The sound of his yelling grew fainter and fainter. He was vanishing. Just as suddenly, the ruby started to flash less and less. I found that I could open my eyes. I was still blowing the whistle…but found that I didn't need to any more. The Dar-koth was gone. Had he run away? Was he still out there in the forest….tracking me….waiting until my guard was down?

I felt a warmth on my face. It was the sun. Dawn had finally arrived. I had survived the night….and hadn't lost my soul. The night of horror was over….so much fear…so much pain…so much death. And all

that I had left was a silver whistle and a very powerful ruby. I looked down….and almost dropped the jewel onto the ground.

Frozen in the jewel was a very tiny, very harmless Dar-koth. He was still screaming….still in pain it seemed. But now he was trapped…..trapped inside the ruby that he thought would bring him so much power. Trapped forever.

I put the ruby and the whistle in my pocket. Now that I had found these terrible objects, I knew that I would have to keep them forever. I wasn't going to chance on someone finding the ruby…and releasing the demon Dar-koth again. I would see to it personally.

I stood up. Amazingly, I found that my leg was healed. *It must have been the power of the ruby*, I thought to myself. In fact, I felt better and healthier than I had in many years. It was like someone had taken 10 years off of my age. I started to walk. I didn't know where I was going, but I knew that I would hit civilization soon. I could hear cars running in the distance….probably on Route 80. I would keep walking in that direction. Soon, I could make it out of these woods.

I knew that I would never be able to tell anyone what had happened. The demon…the hermit…the dead bodies. They would all think that I was crazy. If I didn't have the ruby and the whistle as proof then I would think that I was crazy myself. But the horror was over…for now. However, I knew that I had awakened something inside me….my power as a Finder….and that I was aware of it now. And I couldn't help but wonder….what other horrors lay waiting just under the surface of everyday life. What other wonders were waiting on me to find them?

At the moment…I didn't care. All I wanted was a bag of fresh, chewy chocolate chip cookies.

Momma's Chocolate Chip Cookies

Ingredients

- 2 1/4 cups flour
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 2 sticks butter, softened
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 1 cup packed brown sugar
- 2 large eggs, beaten
- 1 tablespoon vanilla
- 1/2 cup unsweetened cocoa
- 2 cups chocolate chips

Directions

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. In a bowl stir together flour, salt, and baking soda. In another large bowl stir together butter, both sugars, eggs, vanilla and cocoa. Gradually stir flour mixture into butter mixture and mix until combined. Stir chocolate chips and stir to distribute evenly.

Drop dough by tablespoonfuls onto greased baking sheets and bake about 10 minutes. Cool on a baking rack.

Enjoy…just look out for those mountain demons!

The Living Nightmare

It is funny how the cold dark of night can bring visions of terror to even the most holy and pious. She longs for the sun. To feel the warm caress would be some sort of comfort. The heat of the rays, tangling in her hair…stroking it like some celestial lover. The sun is a heavenly metal smith, turning the bodies of Man into bronze and hair into gold. She sighs. Who is she kidding? Redheads rarely tan.

Her skin is so pale that it seems to glow with a luminosity all its own. She is the moon personified. Perhaps she is a creature of the darkness and should take comfort in the black mystery of night. And yet, she longs for the dawn.

"Get a hold of yourself Kail," she whispers into the stagnant air of her bedroom. In the stillness, her voice sounds strangely loud….magnified. It gives her chill bumps to hear her voice echoing on the walls. She needs to buy some wall hangings….or picture frames…or something. Her bedroom, like her life, is mostly empty.

Seeing that sleep has evaded her once again, like a childhood friend playing a game of tag, Kail slowly

rises. Although the air of the room is warm, her feet chill when they touch the hard, smooth wood of the floor. She quickly grabs a pair of socks that lie in a crumple beside her bed. Sliding her feet into them, she realizes that she left a load of laundry in the washer.

The floorboards creak underneath her feet, announcing to the entire house that she is awake. Of course, she is the only living soul in the house. There is no one to disturb on this sleepless night. In the darkness, she feels her way to the door. Once in the hallway, she is able to see, thanks to the small nightlight that glows feebly at the far end. In the darkness, even a small light seems bright. As she walks to the top of the stairs, she imagines that she is a child again, walking downstairs on Christmas morning to open presents and eat candy. She can almost smell turkey baking in the oven. The thought of this food makes her mouth water.

A shadow passes in front of her, making her give a sharp little squeal. Before it can turn into a proper scream, she realizes that it is just her cat, Melvin. A gray tom, he yowls and prances a few steps in front of her. She realizes that he is heading downstairs as well.

"Probably toward the kitchen," she mutters. Melvin is very fat.

Going slowly, she takes the stairs one at a time. She doesn't want to trip and fall. She imagines herself flying head over heels to a certain death at the bottom. How many people die of accidents in the home each year? She can't quite remember. She only knows that she doesn't want to be one of them. She envies Melvin and his ability to see well in dark places. She wonders how she would look with cat eyes.

Her first floor isn't as quiet and tomblike as her bedroom had been. There is a low hum from the

refrigerator in the kitchen. The wind outside is picking up, sounding the chimes which hang on her front porch. She stops to listen fondly…and freezes. There are voices coming from her basement. It sounds like two men, speaking quietly to each other. Her heart begins to beat faster and faster. Her breathing becomes ragged. A feeling of cold electricity shoots down her back and arms. Someone is in the house. She can feel it.

Walking slowly over to the basement door, she leans in to listen. Perhaps she still has time to make a run for it. She listens for a few seconds, fear coursing both hot and cold through her veins. She doesn't hear anyone talking anymore. Was it just her imagination?

Slowly opening the basement door so that it doesn't creak, she pokes her head in a little at a time. She doesn't see anything or hear anything. The darkness of the basement is worse than that of her bedroom. There is a damp, unused smell coming from the basement, mixed with the smells of bleach and dryer sheets. She starts making her way downstairs, walking slowly…walking silently. Was she just imagining the sound of men talking?

Halfway down the stairs, she stops. The voices have started again. Before she can panic though, she realizes that it is just the radio. She must have left it on while she was down here earlier, doing the laundry. With a small sigh and a smile at her own foolishness, she flips on the stairway light and walks on down into the basement. Reaching her radio, she flips off the talk show that has been playing for absent ears. The silence that fills the room presses in on her with a sudden weight that she cannot stand. She thinks about flipping the radio back on but decides that she will just finish up the laundry and get out of here.

Her basement isn't large. It is mostly a small room used for laundry with a few shelves for storage. Most of her storage consists of canned foods and Christmas decorations. She thinks of Christmas once again…the smell of baking turkey seems stronger. Her mouth starts to water again. Upstairs, she can hear Melvin meowing with hunger.

Making quick work of moving her wet laundry to the dryer, she races back upstairs. She decides that she will feed Melvin. She can hear him begging for food. Her stomach gives a little growl as well. Maybe she will have a late night snack. Perhaps it will help her sleep.

Entering the kitchen, she realizes right away that something is wrong. For one thing, the smell of baking meat is stronger in here…almost overpowering. In the other rooms, it had smelled appetizing and pleasant. In here however, she is overcome with the true stench of it. Melvin is pacing back and forth in front of the oven. Something is baking.

As she walks toward the oven, her heart starts pounding again. She knows that she didn't leave the oven on. She hardly ever cooks at all…and when she does it is in the microwave. There is a small white envelope lying on top of the stove. With trembling fingers she picks it up and opens it. There is a small card inside. She clicks on the light above the stove so that she can read. Sliding the card from the envelope, she takes a moment to decipher the words before her.

A perfect feast for you and your beast.
Eat it all up or someone you love will die.

With her heart beating in her mouth, she bends over and opens the oven door. A scream threatens to erupt from her mouth, but a tight knot of gorge is

caught in her throat. Inside the oven, she sees that there are two large rats. The smell of baking fur and scorching flesh lashes out at her nostrils, attacking her senses. Melvin is yowling at her feet. She hardly notices as the card she is holding slips from her fingers and falls to the floor.

She is on fire. Her body is electric, and the pulses are vibrating into her skull, sending shivers down her spine. Normally, she would delight in the feeling. She doesn't seem to feel much of anything these days. At the moment, though, all that she focuses on is the fact that her house has been invaded by a madman. She looks again into the oven at the two roasting rats. One of them has burst open in the heat, spilling its intestines onto the skillet in which they bake. She can hear the flesh sizzling.

She slams the oven shut. The sudden sound barks an alarm into the dark stillness of the house, and she suddenly wishes that she had been more careful. She knows that she has just announced her whereabouts to the invader.

"He's probably not even here anymore," Kail whispers to herself, looking down at Melvin who is still yowling at the loss of a good supper.

But still…her senses are alive. She is aware of the tiny ticks and movements that all living houses contain. The hum of the fridge. The clicking of the clock. The purring of the dryer in the basement where moments before she had been so blissfully unaware. In the current state of events, all of these sounds take on a new role. Each of them masks the possibility of a stranger…*a strangler*…sneaking up behind her…rope in hand…eyes burning with a fever for blood.

Kail snakes her head around suddenly. She is sure, almost positive, that someone is standing behind

her. She can feel the hotness of his breath on her neck. She lets out a shriek when an image stares back at her before she realizes that it is just her reflection, dim though it is, in the kitchen window.

A small whimper escapes from her lips. She stumbles out of the kitchen and bangs into the hallway wall. Something unseen is knocked off of the wall and crashes to the floor, ringing out her location once again.

"Why don't I just ring a bell?" Kail mutters to herself and scares herself when she realizes how shaky and deep her voice has become. Adrenaline is her drug and fear is her dealer. It has pumped a double dose of chemicals into her and she is an animal. She realizes that she is seconds away from mad, scrambling panic and forces herself to calm down. Her hands fumble on the little table that she knows is there. A phone finds its way into her clawing fingers.

She lifts the device to her ear, knowing that it will be dead…cut by the invader. Relief kisses her mind when she hears the steady hum that tells her the phone line is still intact. She quickly dials 911. Standing in the darkness, she listens to the electronic clicks and whirls that let her know her call is going through. Someone answers.

"911?" she cries out into the phone, no longer caring if she is letting the intruder know where she is, "Please help me! Someone has broken into my house. I don't know if they are still here or not….please…send help."

Nobody answers. Kail stops talking, thinking that the line has been cut after all. But then she hears it….a breathing. A deep and heavy breathing is coming over the line. Someone is listening to her.

"Who is this?" she whispers, "What do you want?"

And then the silence on the line is broken…not by a voice…but by a cry. A baby's wail is heard coming out of the phone. Something about the pitiful screams strike at Kail's soul. She screams and flings the phone down on the floor as though it is something alive. She knows that she has to get out of this house.

Running upstairs to her bedroom, she darts her head back and forth looking for signs of movement. She is frightened more now than she has ever been in her life. She runs into her bedroom. It is still tomblike…though more now than before. She races to her bed stand and flings the drawer open. Breathing a sigh of relief, she sees that the gun is exactly where she left it. Feeling the cold weight in her hand calms her somewhat….gives her back a feeling of control. Quickly loading it, she doesn't realize that she is baring her teeth in the darkness in a grimace of terror and rage.

"Now let's see if someone wants to mess with me," she mutters.

As she finishes loading the pistol, she looks down at her bed and another spike of fear drives into her brain. Lying on the bed is a picture. It is a picture of her. It is a picture of her in the kitchen looking in the oven at two roasting rats.

Someone is in the house with her…now she knows.

Just then, the phone begins to ring.

Kail walks slowly toward the ringing telephone, not wanting to answer it but unable to stop her body. With shaking hands, she lifts the insistent contraption to her ear. At first there is silence and she hopes beyond hope that it is 911 calling her back…sending help. Then the silence is broken once again by the screaming cry of a baby…wailing through the receiver

from some dark abyss that is both unseen and unknown.

"What do you want from me?" she screams into the phone..into the air…as she rips the telephone line from the wall and flings the demonic machine onto the floor. And yet the cries continue to seep from the diseased earpiece, leaking into the air and sending their stink all around Kail as she suddenly finds that she cannot stop shivering. In some deep pocket of her mind, she knows that she is probably going into shock. And yet, she cannot stop her shaking long enough to fully comprehend it.

The caged beast of terror that had been withheld suddenly breaks free of its timid bars. Kail shrieks with terror and flings…literally throws…herself toward her bedroom door and into the hall. She has decided to make a desperate run into the night…leaving this madness behind. She decides that the darkness of a Breathitt County country night will be better. The copperheads and coyotes couldn't be any worse than the continual wailing of some long lost child held captive by a madman.

But she stops short. Standing in the shadows at the end of the hallway, she sees a figure. At first, she isn't sure if it is a real figure or just a figment of her overactive imagination and the fear that is coursing through her veins and stealing into her mind. It could just be her woolen jacket that she had hung there this morning. She often uses it on chilly mornings instead of turning up the heat in the house. At first she almost laughs at herself, but then the figure begins to move…slowly…toward her.

Unable to scream, she turns and flees in the other direction to the back bedroom. It is a guest room but hasn't been used for guests in years. She slams

and locks the door behind her. In the hallway, she can hear the heavy footsteps as they come bounding up to the door. Heavy banging begins…stops…begins again…stops.

"Leave me alone," she screams as the door moves on its hinges…threatening to spring open under the heavy assault. And it seems to work. The banging stops. The footsteps lead away from the door. She can hear them on the stairs. With hope rising in her chest, she hears the front door open and close. She runs to the bedroom window and peers out into the darkness. Nothing but blackness and foggy swirls meet her gaze, but she hopes that the intruder is leaving.

He's gotten frustrated and left, she thinks to herself, *or else he thinks that I've called 911. Anyway, he's gone.*

She walks to the bedroom door. She is indecisive. She wants to leave…get out of the house…but the intruder is somewhere outside the house. She wants to run downstairs…lock the doors….bolt the windows. But then again, she doesn't want to leave the safety of the bedroom.

Don't leave, a small voice inside her head begs to her, *You are safe here.*

But then another voice, a darker and meaner voice croaks from the midnight corners of her mind, *What if he comes back? What if he brings a sledgehammer? Or a gun?*

Her mind made up, she unlocks the bedroom door and opens it a crack. Suddenly an arm pushes through and grabs a handful of her hair. She screams in fear and pain as her head is pulled sharply against the wooden doorjamb. She pulls back and a fiery pain shoots through her head as a handful of hair is ripped from her skull. She falls back onto the floor. She sees

the arm and hand waving frantically in the air, her long hair streaming from its fingers.

The door flies open. The intruder is standing there….a dark figure in an even darker house. Kail opens her mouth to scream but only emits a tiny squeak. She is too terrified to move. But then her terror grows even stronger. The intruder walks slowly into the room…and from its mouth comes the wailing cry of a baby. The sound of the lost infant coming from the mouth of an adult is almost unbearable.

The intruder steps closer. And Kail is finally able to see its face. It is a face that she instantly recognizes. It is a face that she sees everyday…in the mirror. It is ***her own face*** staring blankly down at her….mouth thrown open…a mournful baby's wail tearing from the gaping cavern.

It is too much to bear. Kail finally manages to tear a scream from her raw throat. The scream is so forceful that blood droplets fly into the air and onto the bedroom carpet. With one last force of will, she jumps up and throws herself toward the bedroom window.

In that instant, there is only the shattering of glass. She is falling through the air…aware that she has pierced both of her eyes with shards of glass…aware that she is blind. She lands heavily driving another sharp spike of window glass deep into her guts. Pain like she has never felt before cuts through her body. She knows that she is going to die. She doesn't care. And yet, her mind races with panic…for she can hear the footsteps of the intruder…her own footsteps…getting closer and closer. And still the never-ending wail of the tormented baby continues to pierce its way into her skull. She prays for death. And her prayers go ignored.

***

In a dark hallway of the hospital, a nurse looks in on a patient. The patient is moaning and thrashing in her bed. Alerting the doctor on call, the nurse returns to her patient who has stopped all movement and is lying perfectly still. Doctor Kenzill, the night doctor on duty, walks into the room.

"Is there some sort of problem?" he asks.

"Yes…well, no," the nurse says, feeling embarrassed, "It is just that I thought this was a coma patient. She was just now thrashing around….like she was trying to get up out of her bed."

"You're new here, aren't you," Doctor Kenzill is checking the patient's vital chart, "This here is one of our long term cases…Kail Peterson. She has been with us for 5 years. And yes, she is in a coma. It is rare for coma patients to move around…but Kail here is a special case. It seems like she is going to wake up….doesn't it? But she never does."

"What happened to her doctor?" the nurse asks, curious about this strange patient.

"A sad case really," Doctor Kenzill puts Kail's vital chart back down, "It seems that Kail here was a real party girl in her day….heavy into drinking and drugs. Well…one night she got so high that she didn't notice that her baby was in the room with her…and that it was getting into a stash of pills that she had set out on the table. She didn't even know her baby was dead of an overdose of meth until the next morning when she woke up."

"Oh my god!" the nurse exclaims, "She was responsible for her own baby's death?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so," Doctor Kenzill replies, "It wasn't a pretty picture. She knew right away that the

baby had gotten into drugs. The police found her screaming and holding her dead baby in her arms. They had to pry the lifeless body from her. She was a raving lunatic at that time….and she didn't need drugs to help her on her way. And then….just like that…as soon as they took the baby from her, she fell down on the ground….unconscious. "

"You mean she went into a coma just like that," the nurse was staring down at the thin figure that was responsible for such a horrible deed.

"The human brain is a tricky thing," Doctor Kenzill replies, leading the nurse out of the room and into the hallway, "We don't know that much about it really. At first, everyone thought that she had just passed out. But it was more than that…deeper. She has been in a coma for the past 5 years. And several times a day…she thrashes around….like something is chasing her. Who knows what she is seeing in her mind. We can only hope that it isn't a nightmare. Because if she is living through a nightmare over and over again, well…then that would be…."

"Hell," the nurse finishes his sentence, "I agree with you doctor….nobody…not even someone who did something so horrible deserves that."

And in the darkness, as the nurse and the doctor walk away to complete the rest of their rounds, Kail's mind begins to rewind…to reset…to the moment when she…awakens in the darkness.

She continues to relive the sharp moments of terror over and over again until death will finally deliver her to an all too common hell. But death will not come for her for another 57 years. And until that time…she will continue to relive the horror…the terror…the self-inflicted torment (and isn't self-inflicted always the

worst?). We are truly our own true enemy. Kail has found that out…but it is too late for her. Too late.

It is funny how the cold dark of night can bring visions of terror to even the most holy and pious. She longs for the sun. To feel the warm caress would be some sort of comfort. The heat of the rays, tangling in her hair…stroking it like some celestial lover. The sun is a heavenly metalsmith, turning the bodies of Man into bronze and hair into gold. She sighs. Who is she kidding? Redheads rarely tan.

Her skin is so pale that it seems to glow with luminosity all its own. She is the moon personified. Perhaps she is a creature of the darkness and should take comfort in the black mystery of night. And yet, she longs for the dawn.

She longs for the dawn.

She longs for the dawn.

Oh God….how she longs for the dawn.

The Tree

The cool air of the office felt wonderful after walking in from the immense heat that was baking the citizens of Lexington, KY. Frank Mason stared out of the tinted windows toward the easily identifiable Lexington skyline. He loved this city. He loved this state. He just needed to find work…and find it fast. The economy had taken a downturn and everyone was hurting.

"Mr. Mason?" a twenty-something receptionist was looking at Frank Mason with some concern. Frank jumped a little in his seat. He had been lost in his thoughts again. His mind usually wandered whenever he was bored…or was kept waiting at a job interview. He had been planning out what he wanted to say to come across as the best possible candidate for the job. He really needed the work.

Shuffling to his feet and trying to regain his composure, Frank walked toward the receptionist who was now smiling slightly at him. He smiled back. *Have to keep that friendly face on for a little while longer*, he thought. The long-haired bimbo probably didn't even

know what this company was about. She was just the window-dressing. A pretty face in the front office made people feel at ease. Frank saw on her nameplate that she was Maria L.

"You can go in now," Maria smiled again. Frank thought that her smile seemed a little forced….a little fake. He didn't care. As long as he got the job. That was all that he cared for at the moment.

He walked nervously up to the door of the main office. The door was made of a smoky, dark glass. The gold lettering on the door reminded him (as if he could forget) that he was here to see Mr. Gordon Jones – Marketing. He took a deep breath and tried to look confident as he entered Mr. Jones' office.

The office was unlike any other office that he had seen before. He had been expecting the traditional office of a desk, chairs, a lamp, and maybe a plant or two. Instead, the inside of the office was almost completely bare. The walls were painted a dark blue that seemed to shimmer in the soft glow that dripped from the recessed overhead lighting.

A large Oriental rug covered most of the floor, and Frank considered taking off his shoes before stepping onto it. He didn't want to mess things up before they even got started by tracking dirt all over an expensive rug.

"Come in Mr. Mason," a voice called to him from the far side of the fairly large office. The room was rather gloomy and Frank felt his nervousness rise just a bit as he walked across the floor. He noted that there were no plants, no chairs, and not even a desk. Instead there was a large white cube which appeared to be made of plastic. A man was sitting upon it, his legs crossed under him. He appeared to be in his late 40's, his salt and pepper hair long and flowing down his

sides. He was dressed in a white linen suit and had two golden earrings in each ear. He had his eyes closed and was humming slightly to himself. Frank saw that he was not wearing shoes.

Okay, this man is a total freak, he thought to himself, *but I really need the work...so I'll live with it for now.*

Frank cleared his throat nervously, "Mr. Jones?"

The man opened his eyes which Frank saw were a surprisingly pale blue color….it was almost startling. It was like looking into a lake or a pond. He grinned with a boyish charm that seemed to warm the coolness of the room immediately.

"Why yes I am," he smiled, "But you can just call me Gordon. I prefer it that way. And shall I call you Mr. Mason…or is it Frank?"

Frank shuffled nervously. What kind of interview was this going to be? This wasn't what he expected from a company that made nearly 500 billion dollars a year in the pharmaceutical business. Was the head honcho on some of his own drugs that the company made?

"Ummm….whatever…..Frank is fine," he said.

"Please Frank…sit down," Gordon Jones motioned with his hand to Frank's left.

Frank looked over. There was a white plastic sphere sitting on the floor. Taking a deep breath of frustration, he tried to balance himself on the odd shaped seating. He considered bolting for the door. But then again….he really needed this job.

He looked over at Gordon Jones. The man had his eyes closed again and was breathing deeply. Frank wondered if he had passed out or had fallen asleep. He felt one hip trying to slide off of the large white sphere.

Taking matters into his own hands, he decided to move things along.

"Ummm….I guess that you had ample time to read my resume. I have an extensive background in marketing and in web-design. Due to downsizing, my last company unfortunately…" he began before being interrupted by a loud snort from Mr. Gordon Jones.

"No…I didn't read your resume," Gordon smirked, opening his eyes, "In fact, I threw it in the trash. It had so many words. I try not to read a whole lot of words at one time. It isn't good for the eyes."

"You didn't read my resume?" Frank asked, shocked into disbelief, "My letters of reference?"

"Nope," Gordon smiled again, closing his eyes, "Didn't need them. I don't believe in fluff."

Frank felt his face begin to flush an angry red. Was this some kind of joke? Or an initiation of some sorts? He looked around to see if there were any hidden cameras. He didn't know what was going on…but he did know that he was wasting his time. He stood up briskly and bowed once toward Mr. Gordon Jones.

"Mr. Jones," he quipped, and turned quickly on his left heel. Heading toward the door, he heard Gordon's voice call out behind him.

"I didn't need to see those things Frank. I didn't have to. I just KNEW that you were the one that we needed for our company. The job is yours…if you want it."

"Listen Mr. Jones," Frank's anger was evident in his voice as he turned back toward the freak in white linen, "I don't know what is going on here……"

His words stopped dead in his throat. He could feel his heart start to beat wildly in his chest. His brain rejected everything that he was seeing.

Mr. Gordon Jones was floating 5 feet in the air above the white plastic cube that he had been sitting on. His eyes were still closed.

"I think that you should come back over and sit down," he said.

***

Frank Mason shifted in his seat. First class was very comfortable…better than he was used to. But there was just something about sitting on an airplane that made him uncomfortable. He wasn't used to flying…had never cared for it. But, ever since taking the job with Gaia Pharmaceutical over three months ago, he had found that it was a necessary evil.

Hoping to relieve some of his anxiety, he closed his eyes and replayed the scene in his head again…the one where he had been confronted with Mr. Gordon Jones (now his boss) floating in the air. At first, he had thought that it was just a trick of the light…that he wasn't really seeing what he was seeing. But it had been too simple…too obvious…to be a trick. Mr. Jones *had* been floating. It was the plain and simple truth.

"Come back and sit down Mr. Mason," Gordon Jones had said, as he slowly lowered back down onto the white plastic cube that seemed to serve the purpose of a chair for him.

Unable to speak, Frank had stumbled over to the sphere on which he had been sitting earlier. Although it was bulky and uncomfortable, it offered the support that he needed…especially now that his legs felt like they were going to buckle underneath him.

"You were….ummm…you were…" he had stuttered.

"Floating," Gordon Jones had opened his eyes. Although they had still been a shocking color of pale blue, they had also had a tired look to them…an old look.

Frank hadn't known what to say. He had just stared at the floor. The silence in the room had been a creature that had clawed at his mind until Gordon Jones had finally spoken again.

"Although we are located in this fine bluegrass state of Kentucky, Gaia Pharmaceutical is an international conglomerate," he had stated, "We have offices and people working for us all over the world. In fact, we are one of the richest companies in the world. And do you know how we got that way Mr. Mason?"

Frank had only shaken his head…however, he had somehow found the strength to look at Gordon Jones again. Thankfully, Mr. Jones had just been sitting there….and had not turned into a tiger or some other sort of creature.

"Because Frank," Gordon had said, "Our public drugs are just a small part of what we do. Sure…we have all the latest miracle drugs. We can cure everything from heartburn to impotence. But we also have another side. We have a very lucrative deal with the government. We are working on finding plants and herbs that can enhance….abilities….in the everyday person. That little demonstration of floating that I just gave you was just one of the abilities that we have been unable to unlock. Power like that is very desirable to certain people in the government. Power like that is very….expensive."

Frank had swallowed hard. He had hardly been able to believe what he was hearing. If he hadn't had seen it with his own eyes then he still probably wouldn't have believed it.

"Why are you telling me this?" he had asked, "What if I decide to not take a job here? What if I decide to talk?"

Gordon Jones had only smiled and stated, "I think that you and I both know that you aren't going anywhere. You really need this job…for one thing. And also….like I said….we know that YOU are the right person for this job. It's your destiny."

And although it hadn't been spoken aloud, Frank knew that he wouldn't have left that office alive if he had tried to walk out the door. And if he had, who was he going to talk to anyway? It wasn't like the Lexington-Herald Leader was going to print his story. Would the television stations have taken him seriously? He had tried to imagine explaining what he had seen to Chris Goodman at WLEX. He would have been laughed out of the building...or thrown out.

He shuddered to himself and opened his eyes. People were still boarding the airplane. He fumbled with the air conditioning controls and turned the steady, stale stream of air directly into his face.

So far, his job hadn't been very demanding. He had been working in a large greenhouse that was located on company grounds just past Winchester. The farm was enormous and well-guarded. There were all kinds of plants in this monster of a building that had to be at least as big as 10 football fields.

He could recognize many of the plants. But there were some that he had never seen before. For the last three months, he had been busy entering data into a computer about plant growth, moisture content, and fertilizer. But he hadn't felt right….something was wrong. He was doing a job that any high school dropout could do. Surely this wasn't why he had been hired.

Then, yesterday, he had found out that he was indeed moving up in the company.

A note had arrived in his email. It had been plain and simple.

Mr. Mason,

Tomorrow you will board Flight 379 to Brazil. A company car will take you to the Lexington airport at 8 AM. Your tickets will be waiting for you. You will pack one bag of clothing only. Do not tell anyone where you are going. Further instructions will await you in Brazil.

And that had been it….no signature…no explanation….no apology for the late notice. And Frank knew….he just KNEW….that he wouldn't be able to refuse this assignment. That is….if he still wanted to live.

And now….here he was. He had been sitting on this forsaken plane for what seemed like hours….but in reality was probably only minutes. He looked at the people around him….tourists mostly. They were chatting excitedly about their plans in Brazil. A couple next to him were giggling and whispering to each other between kisses. Newlyweds probably.

Just then a loud wheezing sound made him turn his head toward the front of the plane. A large, heavyset woman was making her way down the aisle. She was dressed in a purple billowing dress that flowed around her like smoke. She struggled to shove her ample girth between the seats as she continued to walk toward him. Frank was amazed to see that she smiled at him and gave a little wave. What in the world was going on?

"Mr. Mason," her voice tinkled in his ears like a wind chime. It was enticing. He had never heard a

voice like it before. It was almost like a waterfall made out of diamonds.

The woman reached out a plump hand toward him. On habit, he reached and grabbed it. Her skin was soft and warm…and not entirely unpleasant.

"Mr. Frank Mason?" the woman asked.

"Why yes I am," he said, releasing her hand as she placed her large black handbag in the overhead compartment, "And you are?"

"Martha," she smiled down at him, "Martha Miller. I'm from the company. I'll be going with you to Brazil…although honestly I don't know why I am going at all. Usually I do all of my work at home."

"Oh really," Frank shifted over to the window seat so that Martha could plop down beside him, "Do you work in data entry or something?"

Martha laughed. Her tinkling voice rang out and filled the airplane. Frank noticed that several people turned to stare. He tried to sink lower into his seat.

"Oh no," she giggled, "I do readings for the company. I'm a psychic. By the way…when we get to Brazil, don't talk to the man with the monkey. Something bad will happen…I'm pretty sure of it. I saw a little psychic flash when we shook hands."

Frank just sat there. He didn't know what else to say. *Another company freak,* he thought. At least he could feel the airplane starting to taxi down the runway.

The flight was long and tedious. Frank Mason just wanted to have a vodka tonic (or three) and take a nap. Martha Miller, the self-proclaimed psychic, on the other hand turned out to also be a chatter box. She talked nonstop the entire trip. She asked about his job with the company. She asked about his hobbies and what books he liked reading. She even asked if he was dating anyone!

Frank thought that she asked an awful lot of questions, but the even stranger thing about it was that he found himself just blabbing away. It was almost as if he couldn't help himself.

Probably all these vodka tonics, he thought. But there was more to it. There was something strangely comforting about the woman…even if she did get on his nerves. Now how was that for an oxymoron!

He closed his eyes as the plane began its descent into the sticky heat of a typical Brazilian day. Even in the air-conditioned comfort of first class, he could feel the strength of the sun bursting through the little window. He lowered the shade. He hated to watch the ground rush up toward him. Too many things could go wrong.

"Don't worry," Martha Miller said as she shuffled in the seat beside him, "We aren't going to crash. I'm psychic…remember? I haven't had any bad omens for this flight."

She tapped her forehead. Frank smiled wanly and gave her a nod. He still wasn't sure if she was serious or just a little kooky. Was it possible to be a little of both? Maybe she could tell him what the company wanted them to do in Brazil. He was just getting ready to ask her when the plane bumped onto the runway.

"Welcome to Guarulhos International Airport," a pleasant female voice announced over the intercom, "We hope that you have enjoyed your flight and that you will have a pleasant time in the beautiful country of Brazil. Please have your passport ready for customs. Have a great day!"

The message was immediately repeated in Spanish. While this was going on, Martha had jumped up and was quickly rummaging for her bag in the

overhead compartment. She moved rather quickly for a larger person. Frank was impressed.

"Listen Mr. Mason," Martha said, "When we get off this plane, I'm gonna run to the bathroom real fast. I am about to bust! I hate peeing in these little airplane bathrooms. I'm always afraid that I'm gonna get stuck in them…or worse, fall out into the aisle!"

Frank nodded and tried not to act embarrassed. Martha, meanwhile, continued to rummage in the overhead compartment.

"I swear," she said irritably, "I just hate the way that everything gets all jumbled on these planes."

She finally managed to drag her large, black bag out of the overhead. People were already starting to line up to get off of the plane. Martha stood to block the people behind and allowed Frank to get up. Grabbing his own case, he walked slowly up the aisle.

Everybody seemed to be moving slower than ever. He hated to be jammed in a plane like this. Martha was pressed right up against him. He could feel her breath on the back of his neck.

"I wish that they would hurry up," she whispered in his ear, "I've really gotta go!"

Soon they were off of the hot, crowded plane and into the equally crowded airport. Frank had only traveled out of the country once before, and the experience of being in a foreign place was still a strange sensation for him. All around him people were scattering to the left and right. And Spanish filled the air.

He had learned a few phrases since joining Gaia, but he couldn't rely on what few sentences he had picked up…unless he just wanted to ask for a cheeseburger or where the bathrooms were.

And speaking of bathrooms, Martha Miller flung her big, black bag toward him and headed off toward a sign which read *banos*…or bathrooms.

"Hold that, will ya' sweetie?" she called out over her shoulder, "I don't want to set it down in…something. I won't be too long."

If Frank had ever been a married man, he would have known what it felt like to hold a woman's purse while she shopped, tried on clothes…or visited bathrooms in foreign lands. As it was, he felt a little bit awkward.

Nobody was paying him any attention though. They were all too busy gathering their paperwork together for customs, stretching after long flights, or lighting up a cigarette. Apparently, smoking wasn't frowned upon in airports here! Frank had tried to quit smoking years ago, but he had never been able. Nicotine played dirty.

Just then Frank saw him. A man was leaning up against the wall at the far end of the hallway. He was staring at Frank and then looking at a piece of paper which he held crumpled in his left hand. He looked once more at Frank and frowned. Then he started to walk slowly toward him. But all that Frank saw was the tattoo on the man's bulging bicep. The tattoo was of a large, brown monkey holding a banana that was larger than its entire body. Frank was looking at the man with the monkey. And the man with the monkey was headed straight for him!

Martha told me to watch out for the man with the monkey!

Panic rising in him like high-tide, he quickly glanced toward the bathrooms. There was no sign of Martha Miller anywhere. She was the one who had told him to watch out for the man with the monkey! Why

hadn't she warned him that the man with the monkey was going to be so close? What good was a psychic if they couldn't be any clearer than that?

He looked back. The man was almost up to him. Frank let out a hiss. The man was reaching into his pocket! Was he going to pull out a knife….a gun? With a loud whoop, Frank swung Martha's bag, knocking the man (and a few other people) down to the floor. Without looking back, he ran wildly down the hallway, pushing through the crowd like a madman. He had to get away. He would find Martha later.

Or she can find me. She's the psychic one.

People started screaming. He knew that he was causing a panic, but it couldn't be helped. Up ahead, he saw a group of nuns walking toward him. They were practically blocking the entire hallway! He ran toward them, pushing people out of the way to the left and right.

"Out of the way sisters!" he yelled. He didn't know if they just didn't understand English or if they just liked getting in the way….probably a bit of both…..but the nuns just stood there. He started to push his way through….and that is where his luck ran out. More screams….more pushing….and then the sharp, shrill whistle of the police sounded. The nuns were yelling and pulling at his hair. One of them hit him in the back of the head.

Who knew that women of the cloth could be so viscious!

Two cops pounced on him. They were both large men….heavyset due to the low demand of an airport security job. But now they had a new victim. Frank fell to the floor as the cops landed on top of him. He guessed that pushing the nuns wasn't allowed….even in a country where people smoked in the airports.

Frank glanced around as he felt a pair of handcuffs clap around his wrists. Someone was shouting angrily at him in Spanish. It was one of the nuns! One of the other nuns crossed herself and started to pray. There was no sight of the man with the tattoo of the monkey.

Well, that's one good thing, Frank thought.

Later, Frank would remember that this was the exact moment when things went from bad….to worse.

***

The little office was hot and smelled of stale cigarette smoke and urine. After being whisked away by the two policemen, Frank Mason found himself seated in this room at the far end of the airport. The two cops had left the room momentarily but then had returned.

They were each smiling at him in a way that he didn't quite like…but at least he had gotten away from the man with the monkey tattoo. He wondered where Martha Miller had gone. Surely she would come looking for him and help him get out of this mess.

"Is this your bag, señor?" one of the cops said, holding up Martha's black bag. Frank thought that he looked a little like George Lopez.

"Uh no…no it isn't," Frank said, "Actually, I was holding it for a friend."

Both of the cops looked at each other. The one holding the bag reached inside it and pulled out a little blue book. He threw it down on the table in front of Frank. Opening it, Frank was amazed to see that it was his own passport!

"Isn't that your passport, señor?" the fatter of the two cops said, wheezing slightly.

"Ummmm…." Frank began, "I don't know what's going on here..but…"

The cop who looked like George Lopez asked again, "Isn't that your passport?"

"Yes," Frank couldn't deny it. How had his passport gotten into Martha's bag? He didn't know what was going on.

With one swift movement, the cop turned the bag over. Three large plastic bags clumped out onto the table. They were filled with a white powder. Frank had a sinking feeling in his stomach. He didn't need to ask what was in the bags.

"Cocaine, señor," the one who looked like George Lopez said, "And I take it that it belongs to you as well."

For the next hour, Frank was interrogated. They asked him every question in the book. They asked him about his job…which he couldn't really say anything about other than that he worked for a pharmaceutical company. They asked him why he was in the country…which he couldn't really say because he didn't know himself. They asked him why he was trying to smuggle drugs INTO the country.

And Martha Miller? There was no sign of her. Nothing was in the bag except his passport and the drugs. There was no Martha Miller to be found in the airport. And to top it off, there was no record of a Martha Miller ever being on his flight. Even the flight attendants that they questioned stated that they didn't remember anyone being with him on the flight.

"You are in serious trouble my friend," the cop who didn't look like George Lopez stated, "BIG trouble. If I were you, I would talk now…and maybe it will go easier for you."

"But I don't know anything!" Frank stammered….angry at being in this situation to begin with, "I told you….that bag belongs to…"

"Yeah yeah," the cop laughed, "The mysterious woman who just happened to disappear from the women's banos…bathrooms."

Laughing the cop walked out of the room, leaving Frank alone with his thoughts. He put his head down on his arms. How in the world was he going to get out of this mess? Should he try calling the company back in the States? He didn't know. He just knew that something was wrong.

He heard the door open and someone walk into the room. The cops were back. Looking up, though, he saw that it wasn't the cops. It was a man….a man who looked all too familiar. Frank found himself staring at the tattoo of the monkey holding the large banana.

"Well Frank," the man spoke with an Australian accent, "You've really gone and mucked everything up big time."

"Who are you? What do you want?" Frank asked, "Don't try anything….the cops are right outside! Hey….how did you get in here anyway? And how did you know my name?"

"Questions….questions…so many questions," the man smirked, "Perhaps you should have asked some of those questions before you started swinging that bag of yours."

"It isn't MY bag," Frank said, "It belongs to…"

"Martha Miller," the man said, "Only her name isn't Martha Miller. Her name is Janet. Janet Jones. And she's no good Frank. She's a spy. She's trying to beat us to the….well….you'll find out in time. How much has the company told you?"

"Nothing," Frank said, "You mean…you work for Gaia Pharmaceutical?"

"For fifteen years now," the man said, "My name's Chuck. No last name…just Chuck. Now….if you want to get out of here before the cops come back, I suggest that you do exactly as I say."

Frank nodded. He still didn't trust this stranger…but anywhere would be better than staying here and being thrown into a Brazilian prison.

"What do we have to do?" Frank asked.

"Just watch," Chuck smiled.

Chuck began to flex his arm. His muscles began to move, making the tattoo of the monkey appear to dance and move around. It looked almost real….very real. And then it moved on its own! It began to pull itself right off of Chuck's arm.

Frank couldn't believe what he was seeing as the tattoo came to life right before his eyes. But there it was…standing on the table right in front of him. The monkey looked silently up at Chuck.

Almost worshipful, Frank thought.

"You know what to do," Chuck whispered.

The monkey nodded and headed for the door. Chuck opened it and let it out into the hallway. Then he turned to Frank and gave him a sour grin.

It didn't take long for something to happen. It was merely seconds between Chuck letting the monkey (which only moments before had been just a tattoo on his arm) out the door and the screaming to begin. Frank was still slightly in shock about seeing the monkey come to life. His mind was still trying to register that such a thing could happen.

Of course, when you have seen your boss floating in the air, nothing keeps you in shock too long. He decided that he would just file that image away in a

little place in his mind that he had recently labeled "True but Unbelievable." It was just easier not to think too much about these events. It might make a person go crazy!

Meanwhile, it sounded like a war had broken out in the airport. There were screams and the sound of running feet. Frank flinched when a gunshot rang out followed by the sharp, crisp scream of a woman. Chuck stuck his head out the door, apparently not concerned if he was going to be shot or not. He motioned for Frank to follow him as he slipped out the door.

If the sounds had been bad, the actual scene was even worse. People were running and screaming. Frank saw some of the nuns from earlier kneeling next to the women's bathroom and praying. Perhaps they were praying for salvation. Perhaps they had eaten a bad burrito. Frank didn't care. Another gun shot rang out.

The place was totally wiped. Luggage was lying in the floor. Some of it was open. Clothing was scattered. There was a bra hanging from one of the overhead lights. Had one little monkey caused all of this commotion?

As he ran behind Chuck, trying to keep up with the slightly younger but definitely more athletic man, he saw the cop who looked like George Lopez go running past. The cop didn't see him. He couldn't see him. There was a monkey on top of face, clinging and screeching like a rabid beast.

Moments later, he was free of the hot, stale air of the airport and running in the hot, sticky air of a typical Brazilian day. Chuck stopped just in front of him and whistled for a taxi. After a quick negotiation which Frank couldn't hear or understand, they piled into the

back of the broken down little taxi and were on their way.

Frank took a moment to get his bearings. He was in the back of a taxi (if you could call it that) and was barreling down a crowded street in Brazil. He didn't even know what city he was in. And the taxi….*my God*, Frank thought….it was covered with little pictures of Jesus and the Virgin Mary. There were a set of rosary beads hanging from the rearview mirror.

"You a religious man Frank?" Chuck asked.

Frank didn't say anything….just shook his head. He had gone to church pretty regularly at one time in his life…but that had been many years ago. In another life….in another time.

"Yeah…well…by the time this is all over," Chuck rubbed the place on his arm where the tattoo of the monkey had been, "You just might find salvation."

Frank decided that he was just going to play mum. He would go along with this freak for the moment until he could find some time to get away….get off to himself….find some time to think. Everything was happening too fast. He needed to call home…to check in with the company. He needed to know what he was supposed to be doing.

Chuck reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. He handed it to Frank.

"Just in case you don't believe me," he mumbled.

Frank looked down at the paper which was slightly damp and very wrinkled from being in Chuck's pocket. He was surprised to see a picture of himself! Underneath it was a message which at one time had been neatly typed. Now it was smudged and hard to read. Swerving from side to side in the rocking taxi, Frank deciphered the note.

Find Frank Mason. Take him to the village. Let him meet the old woman.

He MUST meet the old woman. She knows the way. She has seen it before!

Above all else, protect Frank Mason. He is a Finder.

Frank was amazed to see that it was written on the company's own letterhead. He guessed that it could have been forged….a copy….but he doubted it. Why would someone go to so much trouble. But then….there had been Martha Miller….or was it Janet Jones? He wondered what was so important that someone would try to get him arrested….make him attack the very person who was sent to meet him? His head started to swim. Partly it was from the crazy driving and the heat….partly it was from all of the things that were happening.

Where's a Xanax when you need one, he thought.

"Who is the old woman?" Frank finally asked, handing the note back to Chuck who waved it away. Apparently he didn't need it anymore.

"I've only met her once myself," Chuck said, "But that was over a year ago. All that I know for sure is that the company is after something…amazing. It is something that is lost somewhere in the Brazilian jungle….and that place is pretty freaking huge! But this woman…her name is Irza….has seen it."

"But what is it that we are supposed to be finding?" Frank asked, his curiosity peaking.

Chuck just smiled and his face lit up, "I can't really say. I don't really know. I just know that it is something…FANTASTIC. The locals talk about it though. They say that in the jungle…if you look hard enough….you can find the face of God!"

Frank just stared at Chuck. If it had been a few months earlier, he would have considered Chuck to be just another loony. Now….well, now….he wasn't so sure. Was he supposed to find the face of God? Just what exactly did that mean anyway?

A loud honking sound pulled him out of his thoughts. Another taxi was careening toward them from the left side. Frank saw movement in the back seat. It was a woman…a very familiar woman….Janet Jones! She was leaning out the window….she was holding something in her hand. Frank saw the glint of the sun as it reflected off of whatever she was holding.

"Get down you fool!" Chuck yelled, pulling Frank down into the floor so quickly that he didn't have time to register the fact that a loud bang had filled the air. Glass was falling all around him. They were being shot at….and by the looks of things, Janet Jones was not out to just get them arrested. She was out for blood!

"What do you know?" Chuck smirked, "Stuck in this cab….and I'm fresh out of tattoos!"

Another shot rang out, making their taxi swerve wildly from side to side. Frank was kneeling in the backseat in a pile of broken glass. They were being shot at by Janet Jones…the crazy woman from the airport. Apparently she wasn't going to let her job go undone this time!

"What does she want?" Frank yelled out as Chuck tried to take a quick peek out of the shot-out window.

"She wants us dead mate!" Chuck yelled back, his Australian accent coming out thick and strong.

Chuck yelled something in Spanish to the taxi driver that Frank didn't recognize fully. He must have promised the driver something good…probably lots of money….because their speed picked up considerably.

"What do you see?" Frank called out, hoping for good news.

"I can't see…" Chuck was cut off as another shot whizzed past his ear. He practically fell back down into the floor, on top of Frank.

"Well, I saw that," he grinned, wiping beads of sweat from his forehead, "It was a little too close for comfort though."

"Don't you have a gun….weapon…anything?" Frank was exasperated. What had he gotten himself into?

"Nope mate," Chuck looked grim, "Told ya'. I only deal in tattoos."

Just then another bullet whizzed into their car. Frank heard a sharp cry and the taxi swerved dangerously making them tumble to the side of the car. Both men stared at each other with wild eyes and then glanced up over the seat. The driver was lying in the front seat in a quickly spreading pool of blood. They were headed right off the road.

"Awwww no!" Chuck yelled, "She took out the driver. Well….nothing much else to do except…"

And with that, he hopped over into the front seat so quickly that Frank could hardly comprehend it. He did hear another shot fire. Chuck yelped loudly but took control of the taxi, pulling it back onto the road.

"Are you okay?" Frank yelled, feeling helpless in the backseat.

"Just a graze mate…just a graze," Chuck called back, "But I may have a painful time sitting on my bum for a few days."

Frank couldn't believe that Chuck was trying to make jokes at a time like this.

"I'm gonna try to lose her," Chuck yelled out over the noise of the racing engine, "Hold on!"

As the taxi swerved violently to the left, Frank found himself being thrown against the other side of the cab. He tried to grab the seat….the floor mats….anything to give himself purchase. But he just found himself in a pile of arms and legs. He prayed that he would survive both Janet Jones and the crazy driving of Chuck.

He could feel the taxi accelerating and then there was another wild swerve as the taxi skidded on two wheels around another sharp corner. Frank could see dust boiling up outside the taxi.

"Look out the back and see if you see her still," Chuck yelled back, "I'm trying not to kill these fools playing in the street!"

Frank said a silent prayer and peeked up over the back seat. The jagged glass of the rear window was all over the top of the seat. It danced and glinted like diamonds in the hot Brazilian sunshine. Hot dusty air was rushing past his head, making his eyes instantly water. He scanned the street behind them. There was nothing there.

"I think….I think you lost her," he called out, "I can't see her anywhere back here."

Just then the car started to hitch and give. They started to slow down.

"It's a good thing, mate," Chuck was trying to get the slowing taxi over to the side of the road, "I think that this car has seen its last mile….or it could be the fact that we are out of gas. I guess that could be the problem."

Again with the jokes! Frank wondered if Chuck had some sort of mental deficiency. The car slowed to a crawl and instantly the two men were out and in the dusty dirt road that Chuck had driven them onto. There were a few people walking along…mostly local

farmers and a few scrappy looking children. Several of the men were leading horses packing large bundles of bananas.

"Come on then!" Chuck said, taking Frank by the arm and tugging him toward the field beside the road, "I think that it's best if we just clear the area. You know what I mean? She is bound to catch up with us at any time."

"What about him?" Frank asked, pointing to the driver who was slumped over in the front seat.

"Who….him?" Chuck asked coolly, "Well Frank….there isn't much we can do for him now. He's dead….and I don't want to end up that way. Do you?"

Frank shook his head.

"Good!" Chuck said, eyeing an approaching pair of scraggly looking girls who were giggling and waving bunches of red flowers, "Now let's get out of here before the locals notice Señor Deadman there! Plus….Janet Jones and her taxi could be just a minute behind us. I think that I did a pretty good job losing them, but I want to get off this road!"

Soon they were far off the road. Nobody seemed to notice….or care….that they were leaving a dead driver in the taxi as they slipped into the tall grasses that lined the road. Just a few minutes later, Frank looked behind him and was surprised to see that he couldn't see the road anymore. It was like they had stepped into another world.

Chuck noticed that he was looking. He smiled grimly, "You gotta love those Brazilian grasses. They are good for something."

Frank tried to smile, but found that his face just wouldn't do it. He felt hot, tired, and thirsty. Every part of him seemed to hurt. He just wanted to get to a nice hotel….have a hot bath….have a good meal….and

not have someone trying to kill him. Isn't that what anyone wanted?

Just then there was a rustling in the grass beside of them. Both men froze.

"What was that?" Frank whispered. He kept trying to think about what wild animals were prevalent in Brazil. Jaguars? He was pretty sure that jaguars were found in Brazil. He cursed his lack of knowledge about the world. If he got out of this alive, he was going to buy himself every Frommer's Guide that was ever made and read them all.

"Shhhhh," Chuck placed a finger over his lips. The two men stayed deathly still. The movement of the grasses came closer….and a screech started to sound out around them. Frank didn't know what it was. But whatever it was….it was headed right toward them!

Coming out of the tall grass was a large, bushy brown and black animal. It took Frank a second to realize it for what it was…a bear! It was making a large mewling, screeching sound and was shaking its head wildly from side to side. It stopped in front of them and raised up on its hind legs. Frank guessed that it had to be at least 7 feet tall. His legs felt like water. Was this the end?

Suddenly Chuck burst out laughing. Frank once again wondered about the man's mental state. But, the laughter did seem to have an effect on the bear. It slowly lowered itself to the ground and shook its head one last time. And then…it began to talk.

"Honestly Chuckie, old boy," it stated in a rough, deep voice that had a bit of British accent, "I really thought that I hit that one head-on. I could have sworn that I had you fooled this time."

"Oh…oh…" Chuck tried to talk through his laughter, "Honestly, mate, you would have. You look like a great bear….but you got…you got…."

And then he started laughing again. Frank was still in shock that the bear could talk. And apparently, it knew Chuck!

Finally, Chuck was able to get in a breath, "You got the tail wrong, my friend."

Frank looked at the bear's tail. Indeed, it was wrong. Instead of the short stubby tail of a bear, Frank saw the fluffy white tail of a bunny! What in the world was going on?

"Oh….bloody hell," the bear muttered, looking back over its shoulder, "These bigger animals require so much concentration. I was so worried about the front that I didn't pay much attention to the back. Enough already!"

And then the bear began to change…a little at first and then faster. The fur seemed to draw back into the skin, the claws retracted into the paws (which were beginning to grow longer and look more like fingers), and the fluffy, bunny tail simply disappeared. Soon, instead of a bear, there stood a very large man. He was very hairy…almost too hairy….which was a good thing at the moment since he was completely naked. He grinned sheepishly at Chuck and then nodded toward Frank.

"Is that him?" he asked, staring at Frank with eyes that were dark and wild. Frank noticed that the man still had large, bearlike teeth.

"Yep," Chuck stated, turning to Frank, "In the flesh….but where are my manners? Let me introduce you two. Frank, this is my old friend Harry….Harry McCain. And Harry….as you already know….this is Frank. He's the…"

"The Finder," Harry said, still staring at Frank.

"You were a bear," Frank said, trying to soak in all the strangeness that had been happening to him lately, "A real, live bear."

"Oh…that?" Harry chuckled, his mood suddenly seeming to lighten, "Yep…I was a bear. The fact is….I can be any animal that I want to be."

"Harry is a shape shifter," Chuck looked over at Frank as if that explanation would clear everything up, "He can change shape at will."

"I just have to concentrate pretty hard is all," Harry said, "And…as you just saw…it doesn't always work out the way I want it to!"

Both men started to laugh again. Frank tried to join in, but it was just too bizarre. He just felt hot…and thirsty. Suddenly, he was craving an ice cold Sprite more than anything else in the world.

"I'm glad that I found you though," Harry said, suddenly serious, "SHE sent me. She seemed to know that you all would be in this area….but I don't know how she knew. She said that I needed to bring you to her….immediately."

"She?" Frank asked.

"Irza," Harry said, looking down at the ground as though he were embarrassed to be saying the name out loud, "The one who has seen…"

"The face of God," Chuck finished, making Harry draw in a hiss of breath and stare coldly at Chuck.

"You told him?" he asked.

"I didn't see the reason to keep it a secret," Chuck said, "After all….he's supposed to be finding the thing, isn't he?"

"Yes," Harry said, "But still…."

"ENOUGH ALREADY!" Frank yelled out, "Stop talking about me like I'm not here!"

Chuck and Harry looked at each other. Some sort of silent communication seemed to be going on between them. Finally, Harry nodded his head.

"Okay," he said, "Enough talking. This place isn't safe. We need to get out of here and fast."

Frank watched with amazement as Harry closed his eyes and a look of intense concentration came over him. Slowly, he began to change. His nose pushed out…longer and longer. His ears turned up at the corners and grew longer as well. His hands folded in on themselves into hooves. Soon, there was a fine looking horse standing before them.

"Climb on, you two," Harry the horse neighed to them in a gravelly sort of voice, "I can get us there in just under an hour."

Chuck let out a whoop and jumped up on Harry's back. He held out a hand to Frank.

"Come on mate," he grinned, "Why walk…when we can ride?"

"Just don't get too comfortable up there," Harry said, kicking up dust as they started out, "This is a RARE occurrence. I'm not a pack animal."

"Oh come on Harry old boy," Chuck laughed, slapping Harry on the neck, "You know that you love it!"

"Watch it!" Harry warned, bucking a little underneath them.

Frank sat cautiously behind Chuck. He didn't know how he felt riding this horse…that used to be a man…who used to be a bear. But….he wasn't in any position to argue. He just hoped that this nightmare would be over soon.

With a loud snort, Harry the horse took off at full gallop. The beautiful Brazilian countryside was whizzing past them in a maddening whirl. If he had been here on vacation, Frank would have loved the

scenery . Soon, the grasslands were left behind and the three of them were entering a village on the outskirts of a large rainforest. It was here that Frank first met Irza.

It was also here that Frank had his first encounter with the Dragonfly.

***

Frank Mason was alone. All around him the village slept. Both Chuck and Harry had been shown to separate huts…after Harry had changed back from a horse to a human. Oddly enough, none of the villagers seemed to notice or care when it happened. Obviously, they had seen such things before. Frank wondered if people back in the United States would act the same. He chuckled to himself…picturing Harry doing one of his changing acts in downtown Lexington.

Talk about a riot! he grinned.

The moon was pregnant with light overhead…an orb of mystery and illusion. Frank stared at the full moon and breathed in deeply. The sweet scents of the jungle wafted in on a midnight current. He felt at peace. He needed that. He hadn't felt peaceful since this entire crazy adventure had started.

In the distance, he could hear the calling of an animal…prowling the dark undergrowth for its next meal. It sounded like a wild dog of some sort. He contemplated returning to his hut but then decided against it. The animal sounded far away…and he felt safe enough in the village. He took out a cigarette, lit it, and took a long drag. The nicotine flooding his system woke him up a little more and made everything seem sharper in the moonlight. He had tried to quit smoking once but that had been years ago. Now….he was glad that he hadn't.

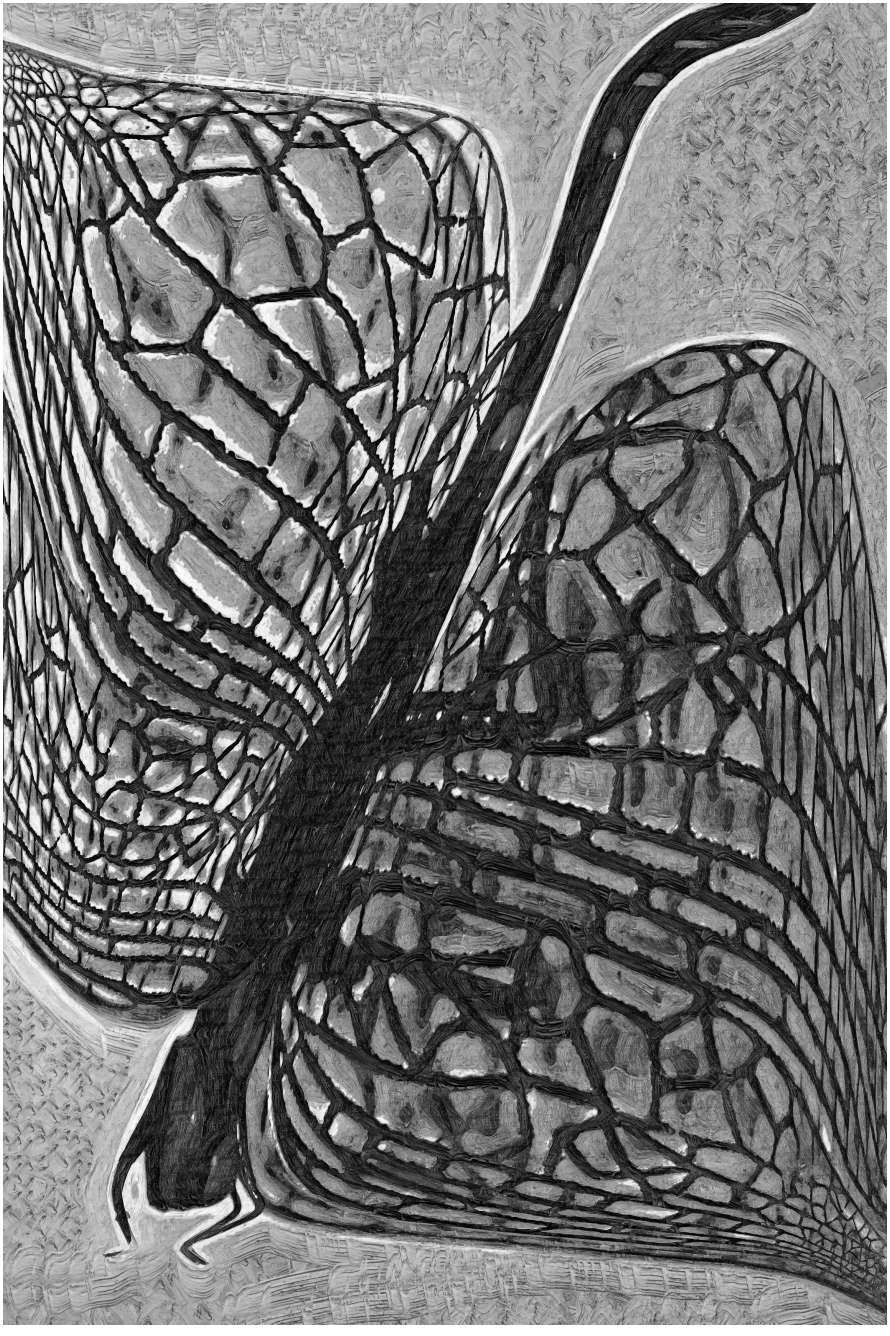
A low buzzing sound made him take notice. It seemed to be coming from the jungle. It wasn't very loud, but it caught his ear…probably because of the relative quiet that had descended upon the sleeping village. He put the sound out of his mind, took another pull on his cigarette, and started to turn back toward his hut. And then he saw it. It was the largest insect that he had ever seen in his life.

The wingspan of the thing had to be at least 3 feet wide. The wings sparkled like rare jewels in the bright light of the moon….all deep purples and greens. A golden body completed the look of some mysterious treasure that had come to life. But Frank recognized the shape of the creature in an instant. It was a dragonfly. Of course, it was a monster of an insect…but it was a dragonfly nonetheless. However, the thing that disturbed him was the fact that it was headed straight for him!

Turning quickly, he started to run toward the safety of his hut. Why had he decided to come out in the first place? He should have known that something bad was more than likely going to happen. Hadn't it been that way all day?

His feet felt like he was wearing shoes made of lead. His legs felt heavy and thick….and they didn't want to work properly. The buzzing behind him grew louder and louder.

Frank looked over his shoulder and saw that he had been wrong about the size of the dragonfly. It didn't have a 3 foot wingspan….they had to be at least 5 feet wide! He wanted to give a yelp in terror, but his throat wouldn't work right. So instead, he just gave a little gasp. He saw the things mandibles working quickly. It wanted to chew right into him. He had to get away!



And he almost made it. He was just inches from his door when he felt the things pinchers dig into his shirt. His feet lifted off of the ground and he started rising higher and higher into the air. The dragonfly was so big that it was actually lifting him off of the ground!

He yelled out. He looked down but saw nobody coming to his rescue. He screamed out again. His voice seemed to get lost in the night air. Soon he found himself impossibly high. All that he could hear was the rapid beating of the thing's wings. He wondered if it was planning on dropping him and then eating his dead flesh. He shuddered at the thought.

But it seemed as though the dragonfly did not want to harm him…at least, not at the moment. It started flying away from the village with Frank dangling helplessly in its giant claws. Over the jungle, they swept through the moonlight and entered a world that was both strangely familiar but all too alien to Frank at the same time. The wind rushed cold and clean over his face, and he found himself relishing the feel…even though he was frightened out of his wits at the same time.

Just then, a light appeared in the darkness of the jungle. It looked like a fire, but from this height, Frank found it impossible to tell. Just as he was thinking this, the dragonfly began to descend. The ground came rushing up toward him at an alarming rate. But right before he crashed…the dragonfly pulled up and he landed gently on the ground.

He felt a heavy weight on his back…and he knew that the dragonfly was still there….that it hadn't flown away. He could feel it rustling down the entire length of him. He hated the feel of the creature, but he knew better than to fight it. Also…he was curious about the voices that he was hearing coming from the large tent

that was right in front of him. One of the voices sounded very familiar.

"I don't care what he says!" an angry female voice was yelling to someone, "I paid him a lot of money…and he is going to show me where the Sapphire Waterfalls are located. Tell him that I will double his money."

It was Janet Jones! She was inside the tent…and she was arguing with someone!

Frank heard another voice…also female…speaking in Spanish. Then there was a reply. The voice was obviously male this time, but it was the voice of an old man, tired and broken.

"He says that some things are more important than money Senora," the second female voice said slowly. The girl was obviously afraid.

Then Frank heard the click of a gun.

"Then tell him that if he doesn't show me," Janet Jones was saying, "That I will kill you in front of him…but that I will leave him alive to think about his decision for whatever time he has left."

"NO SENORA!" the girl's voice cried out, "PLEASE!"

Then the girl started rattling off in Spanish. Frank wanted to get closer to the tent so that he could see what was going on. The voices were all mixing together….shouting and pleading . Frank crept closer and peeked through a crack in the door flap. It was Janet Jones! She was pointing her pistol to the head of a young Brazilian girl. She couldn't be more than 14. An old man was gesturing wildly and crying out.

"HE SAYS OKAY!" the girl cried out, "YOU WIN! HE WILL SHOW YOU THE WATERFALL."

"That's better," Janet Jones smiled, dropping the pistol but keeping it at hand so that she could wield it when necessary.

"But Senora," the girl looked toward the floor.

"WHAT!" Janet snapped.

"He says that you won't like what you find there," the girl looked up, her eyes fearful and large.

"Hmmmph," Janet Jones pulled out a booklet and made some notes in it with a stub of a yellow pencil, "Tell him that I'll decide that…not him. Who do you two think you are anyway? I hired you all as guides and translators….not to tell me what to do!"

Jus then, the dragonfly shuffled on Frank's back and made a buzzing sound. Janet looked toward the flap. Frank stepped back into the shadows…but it was too late. He heard the click of the gun once more.

"Someone's out there," he heard her say, "But they won't be alive for long."

Frank Mason took another step back away from the large tent which was now housing Janet Jones along with an elderly man and his granddaughter.

Only moments before, Frank had heard Janet Jones threatening to kill the girl if the old man didn't show her the way to some place that she had called Sapphire Falls. The woman was just pure evil. He didn't see how he had fallen so easily for her tricks earlier on the airplane. She had almost had him arrested for drug smuggling…and then had tried to kill him while he was in the taxi with Chuck. Now…she was heading toward the tent door…and she had a gun.

"I don't know who's out there," Janet Jones called out, "But you have about 10 seconds to pray to whatever God you hold dear….and then you are going to die."

Frank didn't have time to think. He just felt the strange vibrations on his back and knew that the large dragonfly there was on the move again. The ground beneath his feet just became a memory as he floated

into the midnight sky, leaving the firelight and soft glow of the tent below him. He looked down and saw Janet Jones emerge quickly from the tent. She was looking around wildly…trying to find out the source of the sound which she had just heard. She looked up and at first he thought that she had seen him….but then she just shook her head and went back inside the tent.

The scenery below changed and Frank found himself gliding gently over the rich, dark canopy of the jungle once more. The trees grew together so thick, making Frank wonder what secrets they kept hidden from the eyes of Man. So high in the air, everything was silent except for the soft buzzing of the dragonfly's wings. Frank found that he wasn't afraid anymore. If the insect had meant to hurt him, it would have done so by now. Instead, it seemed intent on showing him things. He wondered if it was taking him back to the village.

The roar of water soon answered his question. The jungle below broke into three parts where the trees were not as thick. He could see water….flowing fast and strong. Soon, he could make out that the water converged from three separate streams into one large stream that gained speed. He could see the white foam of caps as the water crashed against sharp rocks and made its way toward one of the largest and most beautiful waterfalls that he had ever seen. And in the light of the full moon, he could see the sparkling stones that lay on the banks of the river….sparkling a deep, dark blue….they looked just like….

"Sapphires," Frank whispered to the cold night air.

Surely, this was the same Sapphire Falls of which Janet Jones had been speaking. Without much surprise, Frank found himself being slowly lowered

toward the water. The dragonfly flew him out over the waterfall…and Frank had to gasp. It was beautiful…and terrifying. The roar of the foaming water was enough to kill an entire army of men who happened to be so foolish as to get near the edge. And yet, it was so lovely to look at that one might be tempted to end it all for the brief moment of joy of becoming one with such a force of nature.

The dragonfly was lowering them even closer to the falls. Was it planning on dropping him in the water? He didn't think so…and then he saw that they were not headed for the water. They were headed for a little cropping of rock that jutted out from the side of the cliff. As his feet touched the rocks, he found that they were slick with the mist from the falls. In front of him, hidden from view until now, was a cave. He knew that the dragonfly wanted him to go into the cave. He just didn't know what he would find inside.

Slowly he made his way toward the dark crevice that lay before him. It gaped like a dark mouth, waiting to devour him body and soul. And yet he continued his slow and steady trek. He didn't want to trip and fall to his death.

Entering the darkness, he was amazed at how quickly the deafening roar of the waterfall seemed to disappear. It was as though he had entered another world. And the darkness was alive and thick around him….pressing into his flesh and attaching itself to his clothing….making him feel sluggish and slow. He felt around for the walls and found that he could not find them.

This had been a mistake….he had to get out….he had to leave. He started to turn back toward the cave opening and head back toward the light of the moon and noise of the waterfall. As deafening as it was, it

was better than the silent darkness of this tomb. He felt as though the very dead themselves were standing with him….watching him with eyes grown accustomed to such vile conditions. Teeth….ready to bite into his flesh.

And then the dragonfly buzzed its wings….sending tingles along his spine. Small golden sparks flew into the air. They seemed to be coming from the dragonfly's wings. Like silent moths, they fluttered and floated in the air sending out small but brilliant beams of light into the darkness. It wasn't much….but in total darkness even the smallest light is a beacon. They seemed to converge into a line in front of him…..and Frank knew. He had to follow the line. There was no turning back.

Walking carefully so that he didn't stumble over some rock (or dead body, he thought with a shiver), Frank made his way through the cave. The dragonfly kept up its rustling. It was strange, but the vibrations seemed to calm him. He felt that peaceful feeling that he had been feeling earlier. He didn't know why he had been so afraid of this cave. It was actually a beautiful place. What had he been thinking? He smiled as the dragonfly's buzzing wings and golden flakes of light prompted him onward.

Soon, he was able to make out another source of light in the distance. It wasn't much…but then neither were the golden flakes which were floating around him. As he got nearer and nearer to the source of the light however, it grew stronger and stronger. He found that he no longer needed the golden bits of light to help guide the way. As if they had heard his thoughts, they blinked out of sight. The dragonfly's buzzing wings kept up their comforting vibrations on his back though. He was glad of that.

Then he found that he was standing in front of another doorway in the cave. There was a strong light coming from the other side…but he couldn't see clearly. He couldn't make out what was on the other side. He saw moving shapes but whenever he tried to focus on them, everything got fuzzy.

"Well….I've come this far," he said to the dragonfly, "I guess that I should take just one more step."

And with that….he stepped through the door….and into bright daylight.
He was in a large, airy room. The walls were white….plaster. The rich green carpet under his feet was thick and luxurious. In front of him was a glass table with black metal legs. On it sat a large crystal vase full of freshly cut lilies. He could smell their sweet perfume floating in the air. But most amazing of all, he saw a woman sitting and reading a book on the large, plush sofa in front of him.

She was so absorbed in her reading that she didn't notice him…at first. Then…..noting a change in the room apparently….she raised her head. Her eyes grew large and the book fell from her fingers and landed with a silent thump on the carpet.

Frank tried to raise his hands and let her know that he wasn't going to hurt her….but it was too late. The woman started to scream. And honestly….Frank felt like he was going to scream himself. The woman was someone that he knew….someone that he saw quite a bit, in fact. The woman was….***Oprah Winfrey***.

On his back, Frank felt the buzzing of the dragonfly. It was purring like a kitten….and the louder that Oprah Winfrey screamed….the stronger the dragonfly purred.

***

Frank's eyes opened as he sat up with a stifled yelp. Sweat was pouring off of his face, but he felt like he was freezing. For a second, he could still hear the screaming of that woman: Oprah Winfrey. She had been sitting…reading…when he had entered her room. But how had he gotten there? And how had he gotten back? Had the whole thing been a dream?

In the darkness of the hut where he had been sleeping, Frank could swear that he heard the soft shushing sound of a dragonfly's wings. He hopped up and ran to the little window which was letting in the strong jungle moonlight, but he couldn't see anything. And now…it was silent once again except for the sound of his own ragged breathing.

"You okay Hoss?" It was Chuck…the guy with the magic tattoos. He had stuck his head through the door of the little hut. "I thought that I heard you yell."

"Fine," Frank said, "I'm fine. It's just…"

He hesitated.

"Yeah Hoss?" Chuck's Australian accent seemed to be thicker than ever, even though he was trying to pull in some old Western dialect.

"I….I…can't really explain it," Frank shuffled over to his mat and sat down. The mat was thin and wasn't very comfortable. But his legs felt wobbly….weak….and he was afraid that he might fall if he didn't just go on ahead and sit.

He thought that Chuck might take that as a sign and leave…but he didn't. He just kept staring at Frank: waiting.

"Have there ever been any reports of large insects around here?" Frank finally asked…faltering.

Chuck broke out in a fit of coarse laughter…his face scrunching up in a wild map of lines and contours.

"This is the bloomin' jungle!" he cracked, "There are large insects everywhere you look. You'll have to be more specific than that mate."

"Dragonflies," Frank cut in quickly before he lost his nerve, "Any reports of large dragonflies."

And with that, Chuck's laughter stopped just as quickly as it had started. He was staring at Frank in the dimly lit darkness. Frank could see the large whites of his eyes…they looked huge. Scared.

"How in the…" he started, "Did somebody tell you about that?"

"About what?" Frank said, standing up and walking toward Chuck, "What is it?"

"Dragonflies," Chuck smirked and looked down at the ground, "They said that you were good…had a gift…but that was bloody FAST mate! How did you do it?"

"Do what?" Frank insisted on knowing what Chuck was talking about, "All that I know is that I just had a freaking weird dream about a large dragonfly taking me for a little journey over the jungle to a waterfall…and to top it off…to visit with one very frightened woman: Oprah Winfrey."

It all sounded so ridiculous when said out loud. For a second, Frank thought that Chuck would just start laughing again. However, the sharp hiss of breath that he gave let Frank know that he had said something that had upset Chuck rather badly. His heart started to beat a little faster. What had he said? What did Oprah Winfrey have to do with this?

"Come with me mate," Chuck held the door open, "I want to show you something."

They didn't speak as they walked through the dark village. Every now and then they would pass a startled villager: making a fire, cooking an early morning breakfast, or walking out for a morning visit to the bathroom. Nobody spoke to them…just stared with large, silent, dark eyes. Chuck was moving quickly, but Frank found that he was having a pretty easy time keeping up with him. He felt a little bit of pride in that…he must be getting in better shape. Of course, lately, he had been running for his life quite a bit.

Soon, they came to the edge of the village. Dawn was approaching. The moon had sunk below the tops of the trees, but the sun would be up soon. Already, the sky was starting to take on some of the light of the coming day. It wasn't easy to see yet, but Frank could make out the shape of the large pond in front of them.

"The villagers don't use this pond anymore," Chuck whispered, suddenly quiet and reserved, "They say that it is *maljita*…it has 'gone bad.' But there's more to it than just poisoned water. It's something that the company has known about for quite some time."

"What is it?" Frank shuddered. The lake lay before them. Nothing was growing near it…no flowers, no trees, no grass. It was like a great dead pile of ooze…waiting and rotting in the heat of the jungle. The pond was as smooth as glass…dark and deadly.

Just then, a small deer came walking out of the jungle. It walked toward the pond…slowly creeping toward the water. Frank saw that it had a large dark brown spot on its back in the shape of a heart. That was weird.

"Hey," Frank whispered, "I thought you said the waters were poison. Surely that deer isn't going to drink!"

"Shhh," Chuck shushed him, "The water isn't poison. Lots of animals come to it and drink. Drinking it isn't the problem. Just watch."

The deer walked up to the edge of the pond and bent its head down, drinking deeply of the dark, still waters. Frank waited…hardly breathing…waiting for something to happen. Was some large fish or alligator going to pop up and eat the deer? Was the deer going to go into convulsions and die? He felt a sense of dread. Something was wrong…he just couldn't put his finger on it.

Just then, Chuck let out a loud WHOOP and ran toward the deer, waving his arms. Frank's breath caught in his throat. What was going on? He noticed that the deer was startled….and trapped. It couldn't run back into the jungle because Chuck was blocking its way…and he was still running toward it. With a splash, the deer jumped into the pond and swam to the opposite side. It crawled out, gave a little shake, and ran off into the jungle.

Chuck was walking back toward Frank, his face grim.

"Well that didn't accomplish anything except give me a heart attack," Frank griped, "What in the world is supposed to happen here anyway?"

Chuck held up one finger, "Just wait a second Hoss. Wait…and watch."

Frank waited….and waited. The seconds turned into minutes. Still nothing happened. He could feel the humidity starting to rise. It was going to be a sweltering day. He could feel it coming. One of those days where the sweat just pours off of you like buckets of water. He dreaded it.

He had just decided to tell Chuck that he was fed up with this nonsense when something happened. The

water on the pond began to stir. Small bubbles started to rise on the surface. Just a few at first…and then more appeared. The water started to churn and turn frothy. He could hear it sloshing and swirling from where he stood. He was glad that he wasn't any closer to the water. It didn't feel safe.

"What's going on?" he demanded again, but Chuck wouldn't answer.

Just then, a head broke the surface of the pond as something came walking out of the water and onto the shore. It was a deer. No…not just a deer. It was THE deer. Frank saw the large brown spot on its back in the shape of a heart. It was the very same deer that had been in the water just a few minutes earlier. But how? Frank felt his eyes pop.

"It looks….it looks just like…" he stammered.

"Yeah mate," Chuck said as the deer gave a little shake and bounded off into the jungle, "It looks just like that deer that went for a little dip just a few minutes ago. In fact….it is a perfect copy of that deer….right down to the very last flea."

"How….how did that just happen?" Frank started walking toward the water. He felt like he was in a trance.

Chuck grabbed his arm and pulled him back, "Don't get too close mate. You don't want to have a copy of yourself walking out of there, do you?"

Frank tried to picture that…but it was just too horrible to think about.

"It happens every time though," Chuck was muttering to himself, "Something goes into the water….and a copy of it comes out. It's actually pretty amazing. Nobody knows how it works. Heck….hardly anybody even knows that this pond exists. Even the

company hasn't figured it out….and that's saying something."

"But…but what does this have to do with me? My dream?" Frank stuttered, "Remember….my dream about the dragonfly? Oprah Winfrey?"

Chuck stared at him with cold eyes.

"I think that it's time for you to meet Irza," he said, "That will explain a lot."

Frank shuddered. Irza: the one who had seen the face of God.

***

The heat of the coming day was starting to become a more viable entity as Frank once again found himself following in the footsteps of Chuck. They were heading back through the village and away from the pond…the magic pond. Just moments before, Frank had seen it create an exact duplicate of a deer which had gone for a brief dip. He was still in shock that something like that could happen. He wondered if such a creature would be considered a clone. He wasn't sure.

Just then Harry McCain, the shape shifter, came trotting toward them. Thankfully (at least to Frank), he was in human form once more. The horse had been a great way to travel, but Frank found it unnerving to hold a conversation with one.

"Good morning!" he sounded more chipper after his rest. His British accent, however, sounded out of place in the rugged and primitive conditions found in this Brazilian village. Frank smiled grimly. He was nervous about meeting this woman…this Irza. Had she really seen the face of God? Not likely. But still…with giant dragonflies buzzing around in his dreams, magical

tattoos coming to life, and people shifting into animal form at will…he guessed that anything was possible.

"Ummm," Harry asked, "Where are you boys headed?"

"Where do you think, mate," Chuck said.

"You mean….**her**?" Harry's voice stressed the final word, "Are you sure that he is ready?"

"Hey!" Frank grunted, "You can quit talking about me like I'm not here...remember?"

"Sorry old boy," Harry threw a small smile toward Frank, "It's just that….well…Irza is special. I thought that we would wait until…"

"No time!" Chuck interrupted..his Australian drawl resonating in the morning air, "And it doesn't matter anyway. Remember what I told you about this guy….he's a Finder. He KNOWS things already that he shouldn't know."

"Like?" Harry asked, stealing a worried glance in Frank's direction.

Chuck stopped. He turned toward Harry and gave him a long, hard stare.

"Well, for starters," he said angrily, "Frank here asked me about dragonflies this morning….very LARGE dragonflies. And another thing…he has suddenly taken a strong interest in Oprah Winfrey. Now how do you explain that to me?"

Frank saw Harry's face pale considerably. He was looking at him like he had three heads or something.

*Like **I'm** the freak,* Frank smiled harshly.

"Hey guys," Frank said, "I don't know what you all are so worked up about. It was just a dream…honestly!"

They stood there for a moment….not saying a word. Suddenly, Harry just nodded and muttered something that sounded like "So be it."

Chuck and Harry started walking again…a little more quickly this time. Frank let out a sigh and took off after them. Perhaps when he met this Irza then everything would make sense. Something in the back of his mind whispered that nothing would ever make sense again. He hoped that it was wrong.

Coming over a small rise in the land, Frank saw that they were heading toward a hut that was larger than the others. Quite a bit larger in fact. And you couldn't really say that it was a hut. As they got closer, he saw that it wasn't made out of the crude materials like the other dwellings. In fact, he saw that it was a rather large, stucco building. Painted a soft brown, the colors mingled in with the others in the village so that it didn't stand out. However, looking at it, one would know that this was the home of someone very special.

Another thing that was different about the house (because Frank could no longer think of it as a hut) was that it had several large windows and an actual door, large and red. When they got to the door, Chuck and Harry both stopped and turned to face Frank.

"We don't go any farther mate," Chuck said, "It's up to you now."

"What?" Frank was flustered, "You mean I've got to go in there myself? What if I scare her? This woman…this Irza…she won't know me."

Harry started to chuckle, "I think that you'd be surprised at what Irza knows. She has a certain gift at….seeing…things. Don't worry friend…it'll be alright. Or it won't."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Frank was now confused as well as nervous.

Chuck and Harry both looked at each other and then they just shrugged their shoulders.

"It means what it means mate," Harry said, "But when we were sent to get you, it was to bring you here. Everyone has their own journey to make Frank….and this is your journey. We were told to send you in….alone. And that is how you have to go."

"Go on Frank," Chuck smiled, "Don't keep her waiting."

Taking a deep, shaky breath, Frank reached out and turned the door knob. It creaked open a bit. From inside, he was surprised to find that he could hear the strains of music being played. It was an old song but one that he knew. It was a Billie Holiday song….what was the title of it? Wasn't it *Stormy Blues*? Yes…he was sure of it! He looked over at Chuck and then at Harry.

"Do you hear that?" he asked, amazed to hear one of his favorite artists being played in this place….it was so surreal.

"Hmmm?" Chuck wondered aloud.

"No Frank," Harry said, "But that doesn't mean anything. If you hear something…just go with it. Things in Irza's house….they don't always follow the rules that the rest of us have to live with."

Again, Frank found himself wondering what in the world he was getting himself into. But the strains of the song kept spilling out into the air around him….beckoning him. He loved Billie Holiday. The sound of her voice calmed him down….made him feel that everything was going to be okay.

I've been down so long, that down don't worry me……I've been down so long, that down don't worry me……..I just sit and wonder……..where can my good man be?

Closing his eyes, Frank stepped into Irza's house. He heard the door click behind him. Billie Holiday's voice swelled and washed over him.

Opening his eyes, Frank found himself in a narrow but long hallway. There was a room at the end of it….that was where the music was coming from. He walked down the hall….feeling strangely at peace. Was the music calming him down?

The hallway was strangely devoid of any pictures or furnishings. It was almost like this wasn't someone's home. It was like it was just a generic Every House….anyone could live here. What strange place was this?

Stepping into the room at the end of the hall, he saw something…someone… who totally shocked him.

"Oh my God," he whispered.

The woman was old and wizened with years of living in the harsh jungles of Brazil. But there was no mistaking it. At one time, this woman would have passed for Oprah Winfrey's twin.

Sitting in a large red velvet chair underneath a softly twirling ceiling fan, she stared at Frank as the last notes of Billie Holiday faded away. One of her eyes had gone bad and simply stared forward with a milky whiteness. The other eye, however, was as sharp as ever.

He wondered how it had happened. How had this woman…this Irza…been created. And why did she look so much like Oprah Winfrey.

"It was an accident," a voice startled him. It was a young black girl who looked to be all of 12 years old. She was standing behind Irza's chair. Dressed all in white, the girl had the appearance of a nurse. At least, that is what Frank was guessing that she was.

"The woman that you know as Mizzuz Winfrey visited this land many years ago," the girl said, "Even back then she was looking for a place to build schools…to help people live better lives. She visited this very village. The day was hot and the pond….yes, that very same pond you saw earlier….looked inviting."

"But didn't the villagers warn her?" Frank was in shock. He was staring at a clone of Oprah Winfrey…but she looked so old. What had happened to her?

"Of course they did sir," the nurse said, "But surely you know that strong-willed women will always be strong-willed…no matter what others try to do to dissuade them. Mizzuz Winfrey simply waited until nightfall…and then slipped away from the village."

And then Frank knew what had happened next. She had gone for a swim…against the wishes of the villagers….in the pond. The magic pond. And then how long had it taken for her to see what had come out of the waters with her?

"So Oprah Winfrey knows about this place?" Frank asked.

"No sir," the nurse reached out to stroke Irza's hair, "When the villagers found out what Mizzuz Winfrey was doing, they came to the pond and 'persuaded' her to get out. Of course, Mizzuz Winfrey took it all wrong….she and her entire group left. No money…no school….nothing. And then….soon after…."

She looked down at Irza. She didn't finish her sentence…..she didn't have to. Frank knew what had come springing to the surface of the waters. The village had their own version of Oprah Winfrey to keep them company.

Just then Irza gave a moist, meaty cough that made Frank's chest hurt just to hear. The nurse stepped forward with a cloth and wiped the old woman's

mouth. She offered Irza a glass of water but it was refused.

Her body is old, Frank thought, *but her eye is as sharp as a hawk's eye.*

For some strange reason, Frank felt as though he should bow. He knelt forward and tipped his head in the direction of Irza.

She didn't speak but only lifted her hand. The song changed into *God Bless the Child*. Yet again, it was Billie Holiday singing. Frank didn't notice any speakers anywhere. The music seemed to be coming from the very air around him.

"Mizzuz Irza welcomes you…you who are most favored," the young nurse said, not leaving her post behind Irza's chair.

"Why thank you," Frank said, "It is a pleasure to finally meet Miss Irza."

The nurse held up her hand to silence Frank. He watched as she cocked her head to one side as though she was listening to someone speak directly into her ear.

It must be some sort of telepathy, he thought.

"Mizzuz Irza says that you have come a long way," the nurse continued, "She says that you are looking for something."

Frank thought to himself about this strange journey that he had been taking. It seemed like it was months ago when he had landed in Brazil…on a mission by the Gaia Corporation. He knew that he was expected to find something…but he just didn't know what. And now….would Janet Jones find it before him?

Irza's hand flew up once again. The song changed. This time it was Billie Holiday singing *It Had to Be You*.

"Mizzuz Irza says that you are the one who is destined to find it," the nurse said. Frank wondered what was stranger: the fact that the nurse was getting mental messages from the old woman or the fact that he didn't find this in the least bit strange.

"But what is it?" Frank asked, wanting to get to the bottom of this once and for all.

"I can't say sir," the nurse said, "Mizzuz Irza won't say. I just keep getting images of fire…hot fire….that leaps out at me. It….it scares me sir."

Irza's hand flew up once more. It wasn't Billie Holiday this time. Frank recognized the song as *Tomorrow* from the musical *Annie*.

"Oh sir!" the nurse exclaimed, bending down to wipe Irza's brow with a cool cloth, "Mizzuz Irza just told me that you have to hurry! The other one…the one named Mizzuz Jones…is on the right path. You have to hurry….you will find it…but you will also find pain!"

"But I don't even know what I'm looking for!" Frank demanded angrily. He stared hard and deep at Irza. She wasn't moving. Her skin was sagging with age. Her hair was a white, wiry mess. And what was with that eye? The other one stared at him with a ferocious strength that somehow kept him from running toward her and demanding answers to all of his questions.

And just then, the music swelled. It filled his head. He saw things…images. They were coming so fast. They made his head hurt. He wanted them to stop. But they didn't.

***

Chuck looked over at Harry McCain. It had been a tiring day so far…and the day was just getting started.

A fly was buzzing around his head. With a swat of his hand, the fly disappeared. He felt a tingle on his arm and glanced down at it. There it was….a brand new tattoo of a fly. He doubted if he would be able to use that later for any practical purpose…but one never knew.

Harry grinned, "Since when did you start making tattoos out of little things like that? I thought you were more of a monkey man."

"True," Chuck said, "Monkeys are more valuable as far as causing commotions and such. But everything has its place. Surely you know that."

Harry nodded his head toward Irza's door, "What do you think is going on in there?"

"I don't know mate," Chuck said, "But if we need to know, we'll find out. Hasn't that always been our motto?"

"Right you are sir," Harry said, but he stole another long look at Irza's house. Chuck could tell that he was worried about what was going to happen.

And as if by sheer thought alone, the door opened. A dazed looking Frank Mason stepped outside, squinting in the bright sunlight of the Brazilian countryside. He took a step forward…and then collapsed to his knees.

"FRANK!" Chuck yelled running toward him. It was his job to take care of Frank…to make sure that he got where he needed to go. The company…the Gaia Corporation…was paying him a lot of money to make that happen. He didn't need Frank going all loopy now. What had Irza done to him?

"Frank," Chuck repeated, catching the man before he could fall face first into the dust, "Hey mate…you okay? Harry! Get him some water….NOW!"

"Ammm okaaaaay," Frank said. But his eyes weren't right. They weren't focused on anything. Instead they were just staring off into space, like he was seeing something far, far away.

Chuck asked, "Did you see Irza? Did she tell you what to do?"

Frank looked up at him at the mention of Irza's name, "Irza? Oh yeeessss. I saw….I saw."

Chuck knew that it had to have been a shock for Frank to see the old woman. To see who she looked like….who she was an exact copy of. Well…almost. Irza hadn't had the privilege of wealth to keep her young and beautiful. Plus….it seemed that the copies…the clones…aged faster than normal. He knew that Irza wouldn't be alive much longer.

"Irza," Frank was mumbling again, "The one who has seen the face of God."

"Well," Chuck said, "That's what they say. But then again…you don't believe in God, so what do they know anyway?"

Harry came running up with a bowl of water. He gave it to Chuck who tried to get Frank to drink….but he wouldn't.

"Look at the poor chap," Harry said, "He is just staring off at nothing. What did she do to him?"

"I don't know," Chuck said, dipping his hand into the water and sprinkling it on Frank's flushed face, "But whatever it was, it sure did a number on him."

Frank began to mumble softly to himself. No…Chuck realized that he wasn't mumbling…he was…

"Singing," Chuck said slowly, "The guy is singing to himself."

Both Chuck and Harry strained to listen to the low notes that Frank was singing…but it was hard to make it out. It was a strange tune….fast and low. They

watched in amazement as Frank reached down and began to draw in the dust. His fingers worked quickly, making strange patterns and a hashing of crisscross lines.

"What's he doing?" Harry hissed between his teeth.

"I don't know mate," Chuck whispered back, "But I'm not about to stop him to ask. Are you?"

Just then a shot rang out at the far end of the village…followed by screams. Chuck turned toward the sound. What in the world was going on?

The screams grew louder as villagers started running past him. Another shot rang out.

"Go get your gun Harry," Chuck said, "Pronto!"

In the distance, running toward them, Chuck saw the cause of all the commotion.

"It seems that our lovely Miss Janet Jones has found us!" Chuck said, "I want to put a stop to her once and for all. My dance card is full, but she won't take no for an answer!"

Harry ran off to get his gun. Chuck turned back toward Frank. He had to get him somewhere safe…away from that psycho Jones. She would stop at nothing, it seemed. He stopped and stared at the lines that Frank had drawn in the dirt.

It was a crude drawing…but there was no mistaking the picture for what it was: a giant dragonfly. Frank however was nowhere to be seen. He had vanished!

"Well that just makes my day," Chuck muttered as a shot whizzed past his head.

***

Frank Mason was running through the jungle. Any other person would have been overwhelmed by the immense, sticky heat and the smothering greenness of the Brazilian jungle. But Frank was in another place…a safe place inside his head. His body was running on autopilot.

The music! The music wouldn't stop. Over and over, Billie Holiday's voice rang out inside his skull:

Momma may have and Poppa may have
But God Bless the Child that's got his own

And floating in front of his face…a dragonfly. Small and golden, the insect floated just out of his reach, although Frank was trying with all his might to catch it. He knew…just knew…that if he caught it and stopped the buzzing that everything would be alright. But it always seemed to be just a little bit in front of his clutching fingers. And still the songs of Billie Holiday kept playing…over and over inside his fevered brain.

Quickly covering ground, it didn't take him long to enter parts of the jungle that were largely unexplored. The jungle began to fall back into clearing as his feet stumbled over rocks jutting up out of the ground. After almost tripping and splitting his head open, he finally stopped and looked down. No….they weren't rocks. They were….they were….

"Bricks," he whispered, looking up to see that the dragonfly had vanished. He wasn't surprised. The music had stopped also. Somehow he knew that both the song and the insect had never been there anyway. They had just been illusions….ways to distract

him….ways to make him enter into the jungle and find….this place.

Staring around in amazement, Frank saw that he was in the midst of a ruined city. Large, stone bricks lay like tombstones….marking the death of a civilization that had once stood in the middle of the Brazilian rainforest. From the appearance of the ruins, it looked as though nobody had lived here…or even had stepped foot here….for hundreds (if not thousands) of years.

Tall stone pillars rose up like soldiers to his left. Streaming from their tops, large green vines snaked their way to the ground. Frank saw that there were small yellow and red snakes crawling in the vines. He wasn't too sure if they were poisonous or not, but he decided to err on the side of safety. He pulled away from the vines, eyeing a snake that was crawling dangerously close to his left foot.

On his right, the ground was clearer. He walked that way and was amazed to see the remains of what once was probably a paved road. It had been cobbled with smooth stones and could have served as a main way into the city. He stepped carefully among the stones which remained of the ruined street.

Now that the music has stopped, he sensed that everything was quiet….eerily so. It wasn't just that he didn't hear the sounds of the city which he wouldn't have expected anyway. It was that he didn't hear ANY sounds….no birds, no monkeys, and not even the buzzing of insects. There weren't any sounds at all….not even the wind. It was like death had settled on the ruins and was forbidding even the breath of the wind to stir the air. Frank wondered if he was walking toward his own demise.

But he had come this far. He tried to remember what Irza had tried to tell him…but that was all a blur.

He remembered the old woman's nurse whispering something in his ear while he stared at Irza's one good eye and Billie Holiday's voice filled his head like a siren song….leading him to his fate. The rest of it was just like a deep dream….easily forgotten.

Now that he was on the street which had apparently led into the heart of the city, he started looking to his left and right. He could make out the remains of buildings now. Most of them were long gone, leaving only a basic outline of rocks to mark their location. There were a few that were still standing…though barely. Large weeds and even trees had started to grow inside most of these husks of a dead civilization. However, he was surprised to pass one house which looked surprisingly in good condition. The front yard was free of weeds and vines, the walls looked sturdy, and even the roof was still on the structure. None of the other buildings had that….

And then he noticed that there was someone standing in the doorway of the house….watching him. It startled him and he almost gave a yelp of terror….but then he noticed. It wasn't a person standing there. It was a monkey…a very large monkey. He knew that it wasn't a gorilla. They were only found in Africa. So what in the heck was this monkey doing in Brazil?

The monkey was large…almost as tall as a short human. He guessed that it would have to be at least 4 and ½ feet tall. It didn't move….it didn't grunt….it didn't even appear to breathe. It just stood in the door of the little house and watched him. He felt unnerved by the feel of the monkey's eyes upon him, but he didn't stop walking. He saw with some interest that the monkey was wearing a necklace….with a large stone dragonfly on it. What was it with the dragonflies around here?

Rising in front of him, a large stone pyramid rose to the heavens. It wasn't very large, but it was larger than any of the other buildings…or ruins of buildings…in the area. He seemed to be headed toward this building.

"A temple," he whispered to himself, "It was a temple."

He didn't know how he knew that….he just knew. He took one more nervous glance back over his shoulder. The monkey was gone.

Soon, he came to the base of the temple. The ruined steps of this once great building stretched almost straight up. He knew that he was supposed to climb them….make his way to the small dark door at the top. But as he stared upward, all of the steps seemed to flow together. He felt dizzy and sick. Perhaps if he just rested a bit then things would clear up. He wondered where the monkey had gone. Had it gone to get friends….were they coming back to rip him apart?

Behind him, he heard the rustle of feet on stone. He froze. He knew that it had to be the monkey. It had waited until he was too tired to fight back…and now it was going to attack. He turned to face the rabid jaws of the beast.

It wasn't the monkey.

"You?" he asked in amazement as he saw the last person in the world he expected to see.

Frank Mason realized that his mouth was hanging open in shock. He quickly closed it, but he still couldn't believe who he was seeing standing in front of him. It was…

"Mr. Jones!" Frank said in awe, "How in the world?"

"Mr. Mason," Gordon Jones smiled, revealing his perfect white teeth as he stopped walking and began to float at least a foot off of the ground, "I realize that you weren't expecting to see me."

"You've got that right!" Frank said, staring at his boss. He hadn't seen the man in months…but he remembered how Gordon Jones had floated in the air during his job interview. He was still amazed to see him do it.

Gordon Jones floated a little closer. "Mr. Mason," he said, his eyes blazing at the ruins around him, "Do you remember what I said when you were hired to work for us?"

"I…I can't…" Frank stumbled over his words. He felt thick and dumb…like he was going into a trance. How long had Gordon Jones been following him? What was going on?

"If you recall," Gordon Jones continued, "I stated that Gaia Pharmaceutical is an international conglomerate. We have offices and people working for us all over the world. We are one of the richest companies in the world."

Frank nodded, "Yes…I recall. And you stated that your drugs were just one small part of your success…..and that you had other projects….other areas of interest…."

"Very good Mr. Mason," Gordon said, "And this…place…just happens to be one of those areas."

"This place?" Frank asked, "Well…it looks quite old. This place is just ruins. Why didn't you just come on in? Why wait until now?"

Mr. Gordon began to laugh. It was an easy laugh, but Frank sensed some tension in it. It made him uneasy to hear that laugh. It sounded strained. Practiced.

"Oh Mr. Mason," Gordon said, "You still don't get it…do you?"

"Get what?" Frank asked, noticing that he could see the large monkey from earlier once again. It was sitting on top of its house and peeking over the edge at the two men as they talked. It was eyeing them suspiciously.

"Mr. Mason," Gordon said, "Has anyone ever told you that you are a very special person? You have a true talent…a gift. You are a Finder."

Frank was sure that he had heard Chuck refer to him as a Finder once. Supposedly he had a power to find things that other people couldn't. But what did that have to do with this place? It was just a bunch of ruins in the middle of the jungle. It wasn't exactly some deep, dark secret.

"I see that you are still confused, " Gordon said, his feet hovering inches now above the ruins of the bricks that lay on the ground, "Let me explain. You see….this city….this temple….hasn't been a secret to Gaia. We knew about it….at least…we knew the stories ABOUT this place. We just couldn't FIND this place."

"Why not?" Frank asked, looking back at the monkey again. The monkey had closed its eyes…like it was asleep. Frank guessed that it was still listening very carefully to what they were saying though.

How can a monkey listen though, he thought….that's just crazy!

Gordon Jones continued, "You see….there is something here that Gaia Pharmaceutical would like to own…to possess. Something that would give us great power. We just couldn't find this place because…and I know that this is going to sound insane…but this place isn't always in the same location. It….it travels! Sometimes I don't even think that it is on this planet."

Frank stood stunned. He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"You've got to be kidding me," he said.

Gordon Jones touched down lightly on the ground. He reached down to straighten his jacket and then looked up at Frank, "Oh I assure you….I'm not. Surely you've seen enough of the hidden miracles by now to know that there is more to life on this little planet than you originally thought. Life is amazing…and there are more things on this earth that you haven't even thought of."

"So….what is it that you are after?" Frank asked, intrigued.

"How well do you know your Bible?" Gordon asked, walking up to Frank, "Have you ever heard about the story of the Garden of Eden?"

"Well…sure," Frank smiled, "Most kids hear it in Sunday school. It was the place where Adam and Eve lived until they messed up. Then God kicked them out."

Gordon laughed again…that forced, strained laughter. "Something like that," he said, "But do you remember what was in the garden?"

"I don't know," Frank said, looking back at the temple which rose behind him like some misplaced mountain in a sea of green jungle, "Flowers, vegetables, trees…..the usual stuff."

"Oh yes……I'm sure that it had all of those things," Gordon said, eyeing the temple as well, "But do you remember what else was in there….the two special trees?"

"Well….one was the Tree of Knowledge," Frank said, "The Bible states that was how Adam and Eve sinned…..they ate of the tree and then they knew that they were naked. But I can't recall what else…"

"Why Mr. Mason," Gordon stated quickly, "Think again….what was God keeping them from when he kicked them out of paradise?"

And then Frank remembered. "The Tree of Life!" he said.

"That's right Mr. Mason," Gordon smiled a slow, lazy smile. He pointed toward the temple which lay before them, "And if Gaia's calculations are right….we will find that tree inside this temple. And with the Tree….we will find….immortality!"

Frank couldn't believe what he was hearing. He turned completely around and took another look at the stone temple.

"How in the world could a tree live INSIDE that thing?" he said, "It wouldn't be able to get sunlight….air….water!"

"Well Mr. Mason," Gordon Jones' voice came from behind him, "This is no ordinary tree. The fruit of it will let a man live forever….and I want that fruit! I want it so bad that I will do anything to get it. Even hire a stupid idiot like yourself to find it!"

"What are you talking…" Frank turned….and froze.

His blood ran cold. Gordon Jones was pointing a gun directly toward him.

"Unfortunately," Gordon Jones smiled, "You won't be able to live forever. You get to die….right now!"

And then….the world turned upside down.

Frank Mason stood as still as possible. His breath was caught in his throat. Gordon Jones was holding a gun toward him, and he was threatening to pull the trigger. Frank tried not to imagine how much it would hurt when the bullet ripped through his body, ending his sorry excuse for a life as he stood trembling like a mouse in the heart of the Brazilian jungle.

Just then a shot fired, making him jump about 3 feet into the air. It took him a second to realize that he hadn't been killed. In fact, it hadn't been Gordon Jones' gun at all. Gordon was looking around with a look of alarm. The underbrush on the outskirts of the ruins was crashing. It sounded like an enormous beast was trampling its way toward them. And it was a beast….sort of….

A chubby woman who moved remarkably fast broke through the vines and ran toward them without stopping for one second. Her eyes were practically boring a hole into the ground as she ran…like she was following a trail. Frank saw that it was none other than Janet Jones. Didn't this woman ever give up?

"She went that way!" a voice called out in the distance. Frank recognized it as Chuck's. Were Chuck and Harry close behind? How in the world had they found this place?

As Janet heaved her massive frame beside them, she finally took the time to look up from the ground. Her eyes looked glazed over…like she was in a trance. She quickly shook her head and peered at them both with eyes that were suddenly vivid. She smiled. In her left hand, she held a small but wicked looking pistol.

"Ahhhh," she crowed, "There you are! I knew that I could find you…and the temple! I just knew it!"

"I should have believed you in the first place," Gordon sighed.

"That's right! And don't you forget it!" Janet teased, cuffing Gordon lightly on the cheek.

"You….you both know each other?" Frank was dumbfounded.

They both looked at him and then at each other before bursting into a fit of laughter.

"I'm surprised that you didn't put it together sooner," Gordon said, "Although I will admit that my sister has a way with her fake names. But that tattooed nuisance told you her real name….Janet….Janet JONES. Didn't you make the connection?"

Frank thought to himself. Gordon *Jones*. Janet *Jones*. Brother and sister? Now that it had been pointed out to him, he could see the family resemblance. In fact, Janet could almost pass for a much fatter, female version of Gordon. How had he not seen this earlier?

"And you were after the temple as well?" Frank asked.

"Yes…yes I was," Janet smirked, looking up at the ruins of the temple behind Frank, "But I wanted to find the temple myself…before Gordie here could get a lot more people involved. That just seems to complicate things."

"But you told me that this city was impossible to find," Frank said to Gordon who was starting to look bored, "You told me that you needed me to find it."

"And I did," Gordon sighed, "It's just that my sister has a talent as well. It's sort of like your talent…but different. She is a tracker. She can track down anyone from anywhere in the world. Unfortunately, she needed a trail to follow in order to find the city. That is why we had to have someone….you….to find this place. We tried to get the old woman Irza to show her the way…but she wouldn't."

"Not that it matters now," Janet barked, "The old woman is dead now anyway."

"Janet!" Gordon acted shocked, "You didn't!"

"I've been a bad wittle gerwel," Janet spoke like she was a three year old….a three year old with a taste for death and destruction.

Both of them started to laugh again. Frank knew then that there was no way that he was going to reason with these two. They were obviously crazy. He wondered if he could make a break for it while they were distracted. He took a step to the left.

"Hold it right there!" Gordon's gun came up as quick as a cobra.

"I think that your employee is trying to give his notice of resignation," Janet grinned.

"Well…I couldn't really let him leave without his severance package," Gordon's gun clicked as he cocked it…ready to fire.

Janet Jones tilted her head to the left and closed her right eye. She stared at Frank with her left one. "Say goodbye Frank," she said.

Frank's head was a whirl. What in the world was he going to do? There was no escape.

But then….as if by a miracle….a large ball of fur and fangs came swooping down on the two Jones siblings. As long teeth bit into Gordon's wrist, he screamed and dropped the gun to the ground. Janet was too shocked to do anything, so she just stood and watched as the large beast continued to bite down on her brother's arm.

"AWWWWWW GOD!" Gordon Jones screeched, "Get it off me! Shoot it Janet….shoot the damn thing!"

Frank recognized the creature as the large monkey that had been watching him earlier. Before it had seemed so peaceful….almost sleepy. Now, it was acting like a rabid beast. It made loud screeching sounds and rapid grunts as it bit and clawed at Gordon Jones. There was a crunching sound that Frank thought must have been teeth on bone. Blood was flying everywhere. Gordon's face turned a gray ash color and his screams increased.

Janet finally realized that something was going on and broke out of her shock. She raised her gun toward the monkey…intending to kill it. Frank had to do something! It was his only hope!

"NOOOO!" he yelled, throwing himself toward the large woman and knocking the gun from her hand just as she pulled the trigger. The bullet flew harmlessly into the nearby jungle, instead of planting itself into the monkey who had by now grabbed Gordon Jones' head and begun to pull at his hair. Gordon's screams had stopped. Frank saw blood pouring from Gordon's nose. He didn't know if the man was dead or alive.

If he's alive, it won't be for long, he thought.

Janet….panic stricken now….pushed Frank to the ground and ran screaming toward the temple. Frank fell onto the ground. His head hit something hard and the world around him began to swirl. As everything faded into blackness, he thought that he heard the buzzing whirr of a dragonfly. And then, he was unconscious.

***

In dreams, we often visit places that we have seen before. Frank Mason was standing in the middle of a carnival. He recognized it as one of the many carnivals which came through his small Kentucky hometown of Jackson when he had been a child. Around him was a dizzying collection of rides….tilting and whirling. The air was riddled with screams of excitement. He inhaled deeply. The smell of popcorn and cotton candy made his mouth water.

But he couldn't get anything to eat right now. He was standing in line to ride the roller coaster. Strange…he couldn't remember there ever being any

roller coasters at these small country carnivals. How in the world had they set this thing up? Because it wasn't just a small carnival ride like most he was used to. The sign in front of him proclaimed this ride to be **The Devil's Highway**.

And it sure looked like it. The coaster rose hundreds of feet in the air, twisting and curving to impossible heights. He didn't want to ride it…and yet, he couldn't get out of line. Everyone around him was pushing him forward. He felt that little nervous flutter of butterflies in his stomach as he felt himself prodded to his seat.

Sliding in, he felt the cold bars come down around his chest and arms. They clicked in place. At least he felt safe for the moment. But he knew how these things worked. These rides were meant to thrill. He knew that any moment the wind would be whisked from his lungs as he screamed and fell in a free-fall.

"These things sometimes feel like the end of the world," a voice said softly beside him.

He turned. Oprah Winfrey was sitting beside him. No….not Oprah Winfrey…..but someone who looked a lot like her.

"Mizzuz Irza," he grinned back at her, "What are you doing here?"

"What?" she asked, "And miss the ride of a lifetime. I love these things. The feeling of flying…of being dangled in midair!"

Frank's grin grew wider. It was sure nice to see Mizzuz Irza again. She looked so young. Much younger than when he had seen her before. But for the moment, he couldn't remember where he had seen her last. He tried to think….had almost thought that he remembered. But then the ride started.

Slowly, the roller coaster climbed higher and higher. Frank looked over the side. He saw two people on the ground below waving at him. Two men. Were their names Chuck and Harry? He couldn't remember…but he thought that they were trying to tell him something. They were both waving their arms and shouting, but he couldn't hear what they were saying. One of them was holding a balloon. He could just make out the shape of a dragonfly on the side of the balloon.

And still the roller coaster was climbing.

He felt like something was wrong. This ride shouldn't be going so high. He looked over at Mizzuz Irza and saw with some surprise that she was eating a caramel apple.

"I don't think that you should be eating that thing on here," he shouted over the rising sound of the wind as it started to whip around them, "It might not be safe."

Caramel was dripping down her lips and chin. She grinned at him, shrugged, and threw the apple over the side.

"HEY!" Frank yelled and looked over to see if the tossed treat was going to hit somebody on the head…but then he found that he couldn't see the ground anymore. It was just a black, inkiness that was underneath them…like a dark ocean. And yet, the roller coaster kept climbing.

"I don't think that this is right," Frank said, looking around, "We're going too high!"

And then he noticed that everyone was gone. There wasn't anyone on the roller coaster except for him and Mizzuz Irza. She was looking at him, licking the caramel off of her lips with great smacks of satisfaction.

"Yep," she said, "This isn't right. You aren't supposed to be on this ride…just yet."

"What do you mean?" Frank said, "I had tickets to ride."

"No you didn't," Irza said, "Your tickets were fake. Just take a look."

Frank looked down at the tickets which he had been clutching in this left hand. They weren't tickets at all. They were just plain yellow pieces of paper. There was only word written on them…FINDER.

"You need to get off of this ride," Mizzuz Irza suddenly yelled.

Frank looked up…confused. Mizzuz Irza was a mess. She was no longer young…but old, just like she had been when Frank had seen her in the jungle. NOW HE REMEMBERED! He had seen her in her hut in the middle of the Brazilian jungle just hours before. So what was he doing here? Before he could think about it anymore though, Mizzuz Irza let out a whoop. Suddenly, he felt the metal bar come loose from his chest and arms. It flew up…leaving him without anything to hold him into the coaster.

"This is where you get off!" Mizzuz Irza yelled.

Just then the coaster reached the top of the hill and with a whoosh it started to fall back toward earth. Frank didn't yell….he didn't scream….he didn't breath. He couldn't do anything except hold on. But as the coaster turned up in a corkscrew, he felt himself slipping….felt himself falling….felt himself flying through the air.

"Look for the tree!" he heard Mizzuz Irza's voice cry out in the dark. "Find the tree!"

Everything was black. He closed his eyes and waited for the impact with the ground to break every bone in his body.

Instead, everything began to get warmer…and lighter. The sound of the rushing wind grew fainter and

fainter. Soon, it was replaced by something else…the sound of a man's voice.

"Frank!" a man was saying his name over and over, "Frank! Wake up Frank!"

"Is he dead?" another voice sounded.

It was Chuck and Harry! Frank opened his eyes. He was lying on the ground staring up at Chuck.

"Naw mate," Chuck said, "Frank is still kicking. What about the other one?"

"Gordon Jones….our beloved leader?" Frank heard Harry's voice, "No….sorry old chap. I'm afraid that he is dead."

"Well that's just great," Chuck muttered to himself, "We have one dead boss, one passed out Finder, and a missing crazy woman. And just where in the heck are we anyway?"

And then it all came back to Frank. The ruins of the ancient city…..the temple……Gordon and Janet admitting that they were siblings and were working together…..and the monkey which had saved his life. And one final thing…..Janet Jones was already in the temple…..and she was looking for the Tree of Life!

***

The temple was a stone finger pointing accusingly toward the sky….toward the very face of God Himself. Time had ravaged the rest of the city into ruins. The temple, however, seemed to be frozen in place…in a moment…immortal. Even the dust and dirt of the Brazilian jungle did not settle upon its stones. Frank slowly climbed the stone steps one at a time so that he did not lose his footing. At a certain angle, they all but disappeared into one another (since they were so small)

making the steps seem like one long ladder threatening to swoop him into a pile of broken bones and agony.

"These people must have had very small feet," he heard Chuck puffing behind him, trying to keep up.

"Or else our feet are just freakishly huge," Frank called back. He was trying to take his time on the steps, but he knew that they had to hurry. Janet Jones was already inside the temple. She could very well already be there…the Tree of Life. Did it even really exist? Months ago, Frank would have laughed in someone's face if they had brought up the subject. But now….

Soon he was at the top. He turned to help Chuck and Harry as they struggled up the last of the steps. Especially Harry, since he was the fattest of them all. His face was red with exertion and his breath was coming in ragged gasps.

"I should….should… have turned into a bird…..and flown….up," he panted, trying to catch his breath.

"Awwwww," Chuck grinned, "Quit trying to show out in front of us. We know that you can change into any animal you want. But come on mate…you need the exercise. That big belly of yours isn't going to lose itself."

Harry glared at Chuck but was too tired to do anything else.

"Come on guys," Frank said, "We've got to get into the temple. We've got to stop her before she finds it."

"And what exactly are we looking for?" Harry puffed.

Find the tree, Mizzuz Irza had said in his dream.

"Trust me," Frank said, "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Welcome to my life," Chuck muttered.

And yet, Frank found that the words came easy. As they walked, he told them everything that he knew.

Stepping through the crude doorway at the top, Frank found himself in another world…a world of sheer darkness. The stale air clawed its way into his lungs, making him cough. There was a strange scent in the air….one of decay and mold tinged with something acrid that made his nostrils burn. What was that? He remembered that Gordon Jones (now dead thanks to being ripped apart by that wild monkey) had said that this temple wasn't always here. Sometimes it was in other places…even other planets.

What if it disappears while we are in here? Frank thought. What if we suddenly find ourselves on a planet without air? Was he willing to die just to keep the Tree of Life safe from the clutches of Janet Jones? He only had to think about it for a second, if that long. Everything inside him screamed ***YES***. He took another step forward and started to feel his way down the dark passage. He could hear Chuck and Harry shuffling along behind him.

"Hey mate," Chuck whispered in the darkness, "Do you know where we are going?"

"Not really," Frank said, "But everyone keeps saying that I'm a Finder. In that case, I'm trying to find the Tree of Life….and Janet Jones."

"While you're at it," Harry wheezed, "Why don't you try and find us a light?"

"Okay," Frank grinned in the darkness. And then, up ahead, he saw…a light!

"By jove, I think that the old chap actually did it!" Harry proclaimed.

As they neared the light, they saw that it was a flickering torch attached to the wall. Carefully taking the torch off of the wall, they continued on down the

narrow stone passageway. Every so often, another smaller passageway would lead off to the left or right, but Frank decided that the main passageway was the best for them.

"Come on guys," he said, "I've just got a feeling that we should go this way."

As they walked, Frank couldn't help but notice strange carvings on the walls. There were carvings of strange plants and animals that he had never seen before. One carving that kept being repeated over and over again, however, was the strangest of all. It looked just like….but no, it couldn't be….

"Hey," Chuck said, pointing to the carvings on the wall, "Isn't that the Pillsbury Dough Boy?"

"It sure looks like it," Frank said. But how would people thousands of years ago have known about the Pillsbury Dough Boy? In some of the carvings, it looked like people were worshiping the figure. How weird! And yet, just seeing the Pillsbury Dough Boy figure made him feel at peace.

He was so deep in thought about the carvings that he was startled to find that he didn't need his torch to see in the hallway anymore. It was getting brighter. Up ahead, a doorway was spilling sunlight into the darkness of the stone passage.

"Guys," Frank said, putting the torch in a niche on the wall, "I'm not for sure, but I think that this is the place."

"Alright Frank!" Chuck patted him on the back, "You found it! Go on then mate. We're right behind you!"

The coolness of the dark hall left him unprepared for the heat and stickiness of the room as Frank stepped into the light. He gasped. It was a room….probably the central room of the temple….but it

didn't seem like a room at all. The top of the temple was open, allowing light, heat, and rain to enter as needed. And down a flight of stairs, at the bottom, was a garden….a field of lush trees and exotic plants. Birds were flying through the trees and animals were prowling lazily among the branches. He caught sight of a group of small monkeys swinging happily though the vines that hung down from the top of the temple ceiling.

The garden hadn't seen human hands….well, if the legend was true…since Adam and Eve. And yet….it looked well tended. Frank could make out lush fruit trees….apple, orange, mango, and plum. There were some that he couldn't identify. Was one of those the Tree of Life? He didn't think so.

"Oh my God!" Chuck said, stepping up beside of Frank, "What is this place?"

"Gentlemen," Frank said softly, "I think that this is the Garden of Eden!"

"That's right!" a shrill voice snapped behind them, "And you….my friend…are going to find me exactly what I need….the fruit of the Tree of Life!"

Frank knew who was talking even before he turned around. It was Janet Jones….and she was holding a gun. Her pasty face was colored with dark red circles. It seemed that her large girth had made this trip very hard for her as well. Frank wondered if it would be asking for too much to have her drop dead with a heart attack.

"And just what makes you think that he's going to do anything to help you, old girl?" Harry said.

Janet just smiled at Harry and then pulled the trigger. A shot rang out and reverberated on the stone walls….making the monkeys squawk angrily and run for cover in the trees. And although it seemed like time

was frozen, Frank watched in horror as Harry slumped over and fell to the floor.

"HARRY!" Frank and Chuck cried out together. But it was too late. Harry was lying on the floor of the room in a quickly spreading pool of his own blood. The hole in his head told the dire truth….Harry was dead.

"Now," Janet said, pointing the pistol at them again, "Are you going to find me that Tree….or am I going to kill the other one next?"

He was dead before he hit the ground, Frank thought. This woman was a cold-blooded killer…and she did her job very well.

Staring at Harry's dead body, Frank knew that he had no other choice. He had to help her. He had to help Janet Jones find the Tree of Life.

"Frank….no!" Chuck yelled out, "Don't do it….don't listen to her!"

"Let's go find that Tree then," Frank said to a smug Janet Jones.

***

There are moments in our life when time seems to speed up, bringing each new day crashing into our existence without reason or mercy. Then, there are those when time seems to stand still…almost stop. This was one of those moments for Frank Mason. Slowly….carefully….he led the way deeper and deeper onto the lush green floor of the inner temple.

Supposedly, this was the Garden of Eden. At any other time, he may have been ecstatic to make such a discovery. Of course, at any other time, he wouldn't have had a murderer holding a gun toward the back of his head.

Janet Jones let out a small grunt from behind him. "Don't try anything foolish or your other pal here will get it!"

Frank knew what she meant. Janet had already killed one person…Harry, the shape shifter. She had put a bullet into his brain as easily as a kid putting quarters in a gumball machine. He knew that she would probably just end up killing both him and Chuck anyway. But he had to stall for time. He had to think of some way out of this mess.

"Mate," Chuck whispered from his left, "I can't believe that you are actually leading her to the Tree of Life! Come on mate! You should know better than that."

"I'm trying to come up with a plan," Frank whispered back.

A shot fired and a bullet whizzed over their heads. "Stop that whispering!" Janet ordered. Monkeys started up screeching again in the trees overhead.

As they entered the Garden of Eden proper, Frank got a better sense of the place. At first, he thought that the trees and plants were just growing up between the stones in the floor. The soft cushion beneath his feet told him differently. There was actual soil underneath there! He wondered if this temple was built by man or angels or by God Himself? So many unanswered questions!

As if agreeing with him, the swarm of monkeys in the branches overhead started their squawking once more. They kept their distance, but Frank could tell that the band of monkeys was following them. He wondered if they were going to attack them like the huge monkey outside the temple had attacked and killed Gordon Jones. Maybe these monkeys would rip the head off of Ms. Jones.

"Excuse me," Chuck called out so that Janet could hear him, "In the Bible, doesn't it state that the Tree of Life is guarded or something? How do you even know that you are going to be able to get near it?"

"I don't," Janet said, "But that is where you two come in. I need Frank to find the Tree…and I need you to test the waters…so to speak. To see if there really is a trap."

"Oh," Chuck said, "Glad that you're keeping me around for something."

"Don't worry," Janet said, "I just want the fruit. Once I get it, you two are free to go about your business. I won't have any further use for you."

Somehow, Frank didn't think that she was telling the complete truth.

On they trudged through the Garden. For some place which hadn't supposedly had any human interaction for thousands of years, the grounds were remarkably well kept. The grass was cut short, the trees were trimmed into a pleasing shape….even the flowers seemed to be well tended.

"Hey Chuck," Frank whispered, risking the wrath of Janet Jones once more, "Have you noticed how well kept this place is? Who do you think does all of that?"

"I don't know mate," Chuck whispered back, "But I see what you mean. This place doesn't exactly look deserted…does it?"

And then, the music started. Soft at first…and then it quickly grew louder and louder. Frank could recognize it anywhere. It was the voice of Billie Holiday. Once again, he was lost in the song.

There's a saying old, says that love is blind
Still we're often told…seek and you shall find

Suddenly it became effortless. Everything else disappeared for him. In his mind, he wasn't thinking about Chuck….or poor dead Harry….or even Janet Jones with her deadly gun. Everything in his mind focused on one thing…the great and powerful Tree of Life. And then his feet started to move….almost seemed to float on the grass as they carried him first in one direction and then another. Deeper and deeper into the Garden he traveled.

And then, there it was in front of them. The most beautiful tree that he had ever seen in his life. The leaves were so green that it hurt his eyes just to look at them. The branches curved out from the great and sturdy trunk so gracefully that they seemed to be about to break into a ballet at any moment. And the fruit….so full, so ripe, and so golden. And it wasn't just appetizing to the eye….the scent was full of wonderful things….honey, spices, and a touch of zest that he couldn't quite identify.

Instantly he was struck with a hunger that he knew nothing on the planet would ease…except for this fruit…this fruit of the Tree of Life. His mouth began to water. He glanced over at Chuck and Janet Jones and saw that the Tree was having the same effect on them. They both had a glazed, faraway look on their eyes.

Shaking her head, Janet suddenly snapped out of the daze that she had been in. She took two steps toward the Tree….anxious to get her hands on the Fruit. But then…she stopped. She looked around at them and grinned an evil grin.

"You know…this is all too easy," she said, "And I DO think that there will probably be a trap."

Her hand snapped up…holding her gun toward Chuck. "I need you to go and be my gatherer. You are….expendable."

And as if to make her point come across even more, she cocked her gun. The click of it sounded very loud in the still heat of the Garden. It was a click that meant business.

"You have until the count of three," she said, "One….two…."

"Don't do it Chuck," Frank said as his friend took a step toward the large, lush tree….supposedly the Tree of Life, "If she wants that Fruit bad enough…let her get it herself."

Chuck paused, but only for a second, "Sorry mate. But she who holds the gun…makes the rules!"

Janet Jones just smirked again and waved her pistol. She had the upper hand. She had won. Soon, she would have the Fruit from the Tree of Life…and then she wouldn't have a use for them anymore. She had said that she would let them go…but Frank seriously doubted it.

"Hurry it up!" Janet snapped, eyeing the soft, full, golden fruit that was hanging heavily from the branches of the tree. It looked so appetizing. Frank's mouth was watering…even as he stared death in the face.

Frank couldn't believe that it was all going to end this way. All of his adventures. The police in the airport…the race through the city…the trek into the jungle….the flight with the large dragonfly…and meeting Oprah Winfrey's clone. It had all been for nothing. He felt angry and weak at the same time. Maybe he should just rush Janet and get it all over with….take her down once and for all!

"Don't even think about it," Janet turned her gun toward Frank's face, "Take one step toward me and I'll blow your head off!"

"Hold on now, old girl," Chuck said, "I'm getting you what you want."

The sound of arguing made the monkeys in the trees overhead start their squawking again. It sounded like they were directly overhead now….looking down at the commotion on the ground.

Frank and Janet both looked on in wonder as Chuck walked closer to the Tree of Life. Wasn't it supposed to be guarded or something? Frank knew that at any moment that Chuck was going to be attacked by something. Would it be another large monkey like the one which had killed Gordon? Or would it be something mystical…a large angel brandishing a flaming sword?

Nothing would surprise me anymore, he thought.

But in the end, it turned out to be nothing. Standing on his tip-toes, Chuck reached up and plucked the largest piece of Fruit that he could get. To Frank, it looked like a cross between an apple and a pear. Except the color was all wrong. It was golden. It wasn't yellow. It looked like it was made of real gold. The smell….a mix of honey and spice….increased and made his head spin. He wanted the Fruit for himself!

"But you know that it isn't for you to eat," he said to himself. Somehow, he knew that it would be wrong to take the fruit. It would be wrong to eat of it.

Now that she saw that Chuck was in no apparent danger, Janet raced over to him and snatched the fruit out of his hands.

She started to laugh, "It's mine! It's finally MINE!"

Lifting the Fruit to her nose, she inhaled deeply. Chuck looked like he was about to attack her…take back the Fruit that Janet had snatched from his hands.

"Chuck…NO!" Frank called, "Get over here. Something isn't right! Don't end up dead…like Harry."

Maybe it was the sound of Frank's voice…..or maybe it was the mention of Harry's name…..but the result was the same. Chuck snapped out of his daze and quickly made his way over to Frank's side.

Janet watched him walk away, but she didn't make any move with her gun. She was too enticed with her prize.

"Oh my god!" her lips quivered, "It smells so GOOD! I can't believe that it is finally mine…all mine!"

"Janet….wait," Frank said, "Don't eat it. Something isn't right about this. I can feel it!"

Her lips curled back in a defiant sneer, Janet just chuckled, "The only thing that you feel is the fact that you are a LOSER. I won. I have the Fruit. I'm going to live FOREVER!"

And with that, she took a huge bite from the Fruit. Dark juice squirted out and ran down her chin as she chewed noisily.

"It tastes so GOOD!" she crowed, taking another large bite, "It's like sunshine exploding inside my mouth."

Slurping and spewing small pieces of fruit, her mouth worked feverishly to eat the Fruit as quickly as she could. It was like she couldn't shovel it in fast enough. With a third bite, she had finished off more than half of the fruit. Her throat worked to swallow it just as quickly.

"Looks like our goose is cooked mate," Chuck said, "We lost. She won. End of the game…you know?"

"Not so fast," Frank said, his eyes never leaving Janet's face for even one second, "Look!"

Something was happening. Slowly, a change was taking place. For a second, Frank hadn't seen it…but now it was very apparent. Fur was starting to grow on Janet's face. Fur!

Sensing the change, Janet stopped chewing. Throwing the fruit down on the ground, she began to cough and splutter….spitting pieces of half chewed fruit everywhere. She was choking…..choking on the Fruit that she had been trying to cram down her craw just moments before.

"What's….what's going on?" she screeched, her hands drawing up….fingers creaking…..turning black. Her gun dropped…useless….onto the Garden floor beside her.

Amazed…unable to say anything….both Frank and Chuck watched as the transformation sped up. Fur sprouted all over Janet's body. Her eyes turned black and beady….getting smaller and closer together. Her nose shrank and turned black as well…..a moist film growing over it. It began to twitch excitedly. And then Janet….began to shrink. Slowly at first…and then quickly….she got smaller and smaller. She shrank into her clothes, slowly disappearing into her large blouse which now served as a tent.

"Nooooo!" she screamed, "Help me! Please…..it hurts! It hurts! It burns! Aaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

And then her screams turned into screeches. Screeches that sounded somewhat familiar. Screeches that sounded like….

"The monkeys," Chuck whispered, "She sounds just like those monkeys that have been swinging around us all this time."

And so it was. With one last convulsion, the transformation completed itself. Springing from her blouse, Janet Jones….now a small, plump monkey….quickly ran across the grass and climbed the Tree of Life. She stopped midway to look back and give one final screech of anger before disappearing into the

branches. Overhead, the rest of the monkey pack began to wail….greeting their newest member.

"My God!" Frank said, "Do you think that all of those….those monkeys….were once…."

"People," Chuck was scanning the tops of the branches, trying to see Janet Jones and the rest of the pack, "Yes….yes I do. This must be the curse that was placed on the Tree of Life."

Frank tried to imagine it. To live forever….but as a monkey. To never die. But to be an animal. To be immortal. But never, ever leave the Garden.

"This isn't what she had in mind," Frank said, "She wanted power….and instead she found…."

"Living Hell," Chuck said, "But…I have to say…it couldn't have happened to a more deserving person."

"And one more thing," Frank said, "I think I know who…or what…is taking care of the Garden."

He pointed to the branches above their heads.

"You mean…..the monkeys are doing it?" Chuck asked.

Frank nodded. It made perfect sense. What else did they have to do? When you live forever, time has little meaning. He shuddered suddenly like someone had walked over his grave. He tried to imagine the life of the monkeys….living forever…trapped in servitude to the very Garden which had changed them. Cursed them.

"Come on mate," Chuck continued, "Let's get out of this place."

And so, turning back toward the staircase which would lead them out of the Garden of Eden….out of the temple which had brought only death and misery….Chuck and Frank began to make their way back to the outside world. Frank wasn't sure what he was going to do now. There was so much swirling in his

head that he couldn't think.....but one thing was for sure. He was going to be looking for another job.

"Nobody needs a job this bad," he murmured to himself.

"Where did he go?" Chuck suddenly called out. Frank saw that they were at the place where Harry had been shot.

The body was gone.

"I don't...don't know," Frank said.

As if to answer their question, two large monkeys came crashing out of the bushes below them. Their large hands were covered in mud. They stared at the two men with large mournful eyes. Then they turned and walked away.

"If I hadn't seen that," Frank said, "I wouldn't have believed it."

"Do you think the monkeys....took him?" Chuck asked, "Buried him...here in the Garden of Eden?"

Chuck closed his eyes.

"Are you going to be okay?" Frank asked.

"Yes mate," Chuck whispered, "I'm just saying a prayer for my friend."

And in the end, Frank guessed that there were worse places to be buried than in the Garden of Eden. Surrounded by the plants and flowers, one couldn't ask for much more for a final resting place.

Clapping Chuck on the shoulder, Frank started to lead him toward the exit. Just before they walked out of the temple door and back into the Brazilian jungle, Frank turned to take one last look. It was no surprise to him that he saw....hovering there in the air....the largest dragonfly that he had ever seen in his life.

The dragonfly...the Face of God. This is what Mizzus Irza had seen. This is what had been leading him all this time. Bowing his head and closing his eyes,

he turned and stepped out into the warm, Brazilian sunshine. He really needed a vacation.

Pause for Reflection

Poor old Janet. Well…she got her wish. Immortality! Such as it is…. She wanted the impossible. When the impossible becomes possible, sometimes we find that our desires have become horrors!

Sometimes the world gets the hiccups. Everything is going along in a relatively frictionless slide with each day passing smoothly into the next. And then – hiccup – everything changes.

If we are lucky, these changes will be positive. Perhaps Fate has decreed that the winning lottery ticket will find its way into our hands. Maybe we get that long-deserved and hard-earned promotion at work. And for some, the news of a new baby in the family brings tears of happiness.

But what if we aren't so fortunate? Then the hiccups in life can bring about near disastrous events. The loss of a job doesn't seem too far out there, especially in a downturn of the economy. How many lives and dreams have been ruined because of this very fact?

Then again, the economy can improve. People can get new training and new employment. What if – instead – the hiccup is more personal and more direct? What if it is sickness or even death?

Human beings are remarkable creatures. We go through each and every day of our lives knowing our mortal frailty and limitations. We even know that life is not infinite on this earth. We each have a certain set number of days that we are using up at a constant rate.

But, as I have stated before, we are remarkable. We go about our lives without seemingly giving these things a second thought. True, the religious sects often preach and wail about such things. In turn, this brings about uncomfortable and forced acknowledgement. But as a whole, we do not spend each and every minute of our days thinking about our limitations. To do so would bring about madness.

So we are often surprised when life's hiccups bring about these less than desirable changes into our own lives.

If this is the case, then you may be wondering what keeps everything from completely disintegrating when we are faced with such. In my experience, there is one force that is powerful enough to soothe any hiccups in life. That is the power of love.

The drawing together of family and friends at the bedside of the sick or dying allows them to express their love and give their support. With each person supporting just a little, the group as a whole is able to bear quite a bit.

My wife and I used to own a couch which we purchased basically because it was cheap – and we were poor at the time. It wasn't a very comfortable piece of furniture, so when it came time for us to move, we decided to get rid of it.

You should have seen us trying to get this thing out of our apartment! It was three times as heavy as it was uncomfortable. I joked with Lisa that the reason it was such a lousy sofa was because it was made of solid rock!

This thing was impossible for one person to move and even for the two of us to lift. So, we did what anyone would do. We called over some of our friends and got them to come and help. What was an impossible task for one was nothing when there were six of us doing the work. We were easily able to pack that old sofa out.

So what does this have to do with our lives and those unexpected changes? Well…everything! Don't try to face these challenges alone. What may seem to be a Herculean task to one may not seem as trying when we are able to draw strength from friends, family, and loved ones.

We are all in this thing called life together. None of us are immune to the unexpected. And as soon as we think we are, life will come along and pull the rug out from under our feet!

We are all connected. Today, I may be in one of life's high phases while you may be facing trials. Tomorrow, the situation may be reversed. But if we all stand by each other to help each other up, we will all come through this a little easier than we would alone. So the next time you are down, I will do my best to offer you my hand in support. And by pulling you up, I pull myself up also.

If only Janet had found that out. Oh well…banana anyone?

Dark as Coal

Mary Jones stood at the sink washing up a mess of potatoes for supper. Her husband Walter was a coal-miner, and his favorite meal was any kind of fried meat (chicken, beef, pork…he didn't care!) and fried taters. So, being the good wife that she was, Mary always made sure that there were fried taters on the table. At breakfast, they had fried eggs, bacon, and fried taters. For lunch, she sent him along with a few cans of potted meat, crackers, a Twinkie…and a small dish of leftover fried taters. And for supper each night, she made even more fried taters.

Truth be told, Mary was quite sick of fried taters. Sometimes just the smell of them frying made her want to puke her guts out. But, she was raised to please her husband. And so…she made fried taters. Day in and day out. Sometimes she even dreamed that she was frying up a mess of taters.

Mary sighed. It was a good little life that she and Walter had made for themselves here in the hills of Breathitt County, Kentucky. She had been a high-school dropout and without an education, she hadn't

had much hope for a comfortable future. But then she had seen Walter at Save-a-Lot one day while shopping for pickled bologna. Walter had finished high school and had a good job as a coal miner. He wasn't much to look at. His nose was sort of long and crooked and he was missing a few teeth. He also had knobby legs. He came out of the mines each day just as black as you please. And he sort of smelled.

But he was good to her. He didn't beat her. And he had a decent job. And she was the only one of her family who wasn't on food stamps or welfare…so she guessed that she was doing pretty well in life.

She and Walter had a real nice double-wide trailer on land that they had bought and paid for. Their well had good water, and they had two dozen chickens in the back yard that gave them plenty of eggs to eat.

They raised a little garden in the summer, and Mary had gotten quite good at canning beans, tomato juice, and pickled corn. The pickled corn went along real good with pickled bologna…and fried taters. She smacked her lips and knew that she was going to cook that for supper tonight. Walter wouldn't care….he only cared for taters.

Happy with her lot in life, Mary began to hum a few bars of *Jesus Loves Me*. She hadn't been to church in a long time, and she felt a little guilty about not keepin' up with the Lord. But she had gone to so much church when she was a little girl that she felt that she was due a little break.

Walter didn't believe in churches. But he was a God-fearin' man. He prayed a lot at home…when he wasn't drinkin'. Not that he was a drunk. He just liked to cut wild sometimes. Mary didn't care as long as Walter kept workin' and bringing home that paycheck.

She could put up with a little drinkin'. She could put up with a lot of things.

Bending down to get a pan out for the pickled corn, she suddenly felt like she wasn't alone. It was weird because she and Walter were the only ones who lived in their little double-wide. They hadn't had any kids yet. Truth be told, Mary wasn't too sure that she even wanted kids. All of her sisters and brothers had kids…tons of them. And kids meant one thing….spending a lot of money. Money was hard to come by, and Mary didn't want to be spending any of her money on a bunch of snot-nosed kids.

But the feeling persisted. Someone was standing behind her! With a startled screech, she jumped up and twirled around, brandishing the pot in her hand like a club. There was nobody behind her. Besides her, the kitchen was empty.

Laughing to herself, she turned back to her stove.

"Silly woman," she whispered to herself, opening up a nice, fat jar of pickled corn, "Givin' yourself the willies. What are ya? A little girl?"

It just so happened that at that exact moment something moving caught the corner of her eye. Without moving her head, she raised her eyes and looked in the mirror that hung on the wall behind her stove.

Walter was standing behind her…staring at her with eyes wide with fright. His face was black, making his eyes appear even whiter and wider than ever. His mouth was open like he was screaming…but no words were coming out of his mouth. And he was reaching out toward her…his hands clutching for her.

With a true scream this time, Mary twirled around. Had Walter gone crazy? Why was he home so early?

Nobody was behind her. Nobody at all. The kitchen was empty.

Just then the phone rang, making her screech out again. Her hands shaking nervously, she fumbled for the receiver. At first she was so nervous that she had the dumb thing upside down. She finally figured out what was wrong and turned it back around.

"Mary?" a tiny voice called out over the phone, "Mary? This is Jenny Smith…from down the road. Oh God Mary…you've gotta' come quick. There's been an accident….at the mine."

Mary's legs felt weak…and she slowly slid to the floor. The voice at the other end of the phone…Jenny Smith….kept going.

"Mary? Are you there?" it insisted in its hysterical tone, "There's been a cave-in at the mine. There's a bunch of 'em trapped down there. My Bill…and your Walter. They're trapped! Trapped!"

Suddenly it was hard to breath. Mary kept thinking about what she had just seen in her kitchen.

"Mary?" Jenny kept going, "You've got to come. They might all be dead!"

***

Mary Jones stood huddled with a small group of women near the entrance to the Number 23 mine. They were each holding signs prompting people to "Pray to Jesus" and "Hope for Miracles." But Mary knew in her heart that there was not going to be a miracle for any of them. It was hopeless. Everyone knew it. It was just that when you love someone as much as she and the other wives loved their husbands, it was hard to give up hope.

It had been one week since she had seen the vision in her mirror. Walter had been standing behind her, staring at her….holding out his arms toward her. It had frightened her at the time. Then the phone call from Jenny Smith had made everything crystal clear in her head. It had been a ghost….Walter's ghost. He had come to say goodbye.

According to the news, which had been covering the story every day for the past week, the mine had collapsed due to bad mining conditions and poor management. Of course, then the news had to bring up every old story about mine citations and other disasters in mining history…as if people wanted to hear that stuff anyway! About three days into the disaster, the news stopped calling it a search and rescue mission. Now it was a search and find mission…as in finding the dead bodies of all the miners.

Mary wiped a tear from her face. She had thought that they were all cried out, but she surprised herself. She just hoped that Walter had gone quickly. She didn't like to think that he might have suffered.

"Pray with me Mary," Jenny Smith trod up beside her and grabbed her by the hand, pulling her down onto the rocks.

Mary didn't particularly feel like praying. It was hot…and the sharp gravels were digging into her knees. She didn't want to upset Jenny though. Jenny was taking it harder than most of them. She had just married Bill Smith two months ago…and she was already expecting a child. It was going to be hard raising a baby without a husband…especially at 16. So, Mary bowed her head as Jenny began to weep and wail out to God for a miracle. She wasn't totally cold-hearted. And besides, she could put up with a lot of

things. A little physical discomfort wasn't going to kill her.

Just then there was a sound of loud shouting coming from the direction of the mine. Several men in yellow coats and hard hats came running out of the mine, waving their arms and motioning for help. Mary froze. Her heart dropped down into her stomach which was sour anyway from lack of a proper diet and sleep. Had they found the bodies? Was this the end? She found that she was clutching Jenny Smith a little too tightly…but she couldn't help it.

One of the miners who was standing vigil near the entrance of the mine came running toward the group of wives. He shouted out, "They found them. They found the bodies. Oh dear God…they found all the bodies."

Mary heard the wailing start up around her as the women began screaming out their pain and anguish. She had started to tear up again also. But she couldn't figure out if it was out of sadness for the loss of her husband or relief that his body had been found. She guessed a little of both. At least there would be closure. She wondered how much insurance money she would get from the mine….and how long it would last her.

Another miner came storming up to them. His words made her heart stop. "One of them is still alive. It's a miracle! One of the trapped miners is still alive! Praise God!"

Her breath caught in her throat. She looked over at Jenny Smith. They were still holding each other. Their eyes locked. Instantly they pushed apart from each other. They knew….they both knew…that in a moment, one of them might hear the wonderful news that her husband was still alive. And they both in that moment knew that they were wishing that it was

true…that their husband was still alive. But by doing so….Mary was, in a sense, wishing that Jenny's husband was dead. And she knew that Jenny was doing the same thing about Walter. And you just can't hold onto someone who is wishing death upon your family, now can you?

Mary got to her feet. She didn't offer to help Jenny up. Let her stay down on the ground and pray some more. Mary was going to start walking toward the mine. She just had to see…who was still alive? Some more of the wives started walking with her.

"Who is it?" someone yelled out, "Who survived?"

And then, another man in a yellow coat and hard hat appeared. He was carrying one end of a stretcher. Another man, similarly dressed, was carrying the other end. And on the stretcher was…

"WALTER!" Mary screamed!

And it was Walter. She could recognize that long, crooked nose from anywhere. She ran toward him, but someone was holding her back.

"No Mary," a voice was saying, "Don't look at him. He's alive…but something's wrong with him. Don't look at him Mary. We've got to get him to the hospital."

But she did look at him. She looked at his face….as dark as coal. She looked at his hair…matted and clumped with dirt…mud…and something else. And his mouth….it looked red and raw. Like he had been punched in the mouth.

And as she was looking at him…trying to get to him…he opened his eyes. And it was almost like it was in her kitchen that day…right before the accident. One eye was white….and it was Walter…she could see it! But the other eye….the other eye….was as black as midnight. And it was shining. And Walter started to scream and scream and scream. He was reaching out

toward her, his hands drawn into claws. But Mary didn't care. Walter was still alive.

***

Mary Jones took another swig of green tea, cold and calming as it swished in her mouth and soothed her dry throat. The last three weeks had been anything but calm…and she needed all the help that she could get. Life wasn't easy. She had always known that. But still…the blur of hospitals, doctors, tests, x-rays, and even more tests swirled in her mind, making her dizzy. So for the moment, she was holding onto her sanity by enjoying one moment of peace with her cold bottle of green tea from the hospital cafeteria.

Three weeks. It was hard to believe that the time had gone by so quickly. And still Walter was what the doctors called a "relatively mild coma." What in the heck did that mean anyway? As far as Mary was concerned, a coma was a coma was a coma. But the doctors assured her that this was a very light state of mind….a healing state…and that Walter would most likely come out of it at any time.

She walked down the long, cold hallway. It was just past midnight, so the halls were mostly empty now….just a few haggard looking people who were here for their loved ones. And the night shift. She had heard it was called a skeleton crew. She shuddered. It wasn't the best of terms for a hospital. God…she needed a cigarette.

Stepping outside, she slid her body onto a bench and lit up. Taking a drag, she inhaled the harsh smoke into her lungs. It was like breathing death. And that was just fine to her. She wanted to kill this feeling of hopelessness that was pressing into her mind. Maybe a

little death would be just the thing that would do it. She took another pull and exhaled slowly, watching the smoke drift lazily into the night air.

She couldn't get the idea of Walter and his…deformity…out of her mind. His eye….his one eye….the left one. It had been black…as dark as coal. It wasn't normal. And the doctors still couldn't explain it. There wasn't any blood buildup. There wasn't any damage to the eye at all, as far as they could see. But there was one thing that was terribly wrong with Walter. When she had first heard it…she had almost passed out.

"Mrs. Jones," Doctor Franklin, the head physician had pulled her aside a few hours after Walter had been admitted to the local hospital. His expression had told her that something was wrong. At first, she had assumed that Walter had died. But that wasn't the case.

"I'm afraid that I have some very bad news," Doctor Franklin had said, "But I don't really know how to explain it…so I'm just going to come right out with it."

He had spent the next 30 minutes going into detail about how Walter should have been killed with all the other miners…how it had been a miracle that he had survived the cave-in. And then he went on.

"Your husband has a large jagged piece of coal that is imbedded in his skull," he said to Mary's amazement, "In fact, the x-rays show that it is penetrating his brain. In all my days, I've never seen anything like it. He should be dead."

"Is he going to die, doctor?" she had asked, wringing her hands with worry.

"Well….I should be saying yes," Doctor Franklin had continued, "But I can't. All of his vital signs are

strong….and getting stronger. It seems that he is in perfect health…at least physically. And all of his brain waves seem to be in the normal range. But….."

"Go on…." she had prompted.

"I'm afraid that we can't remove it," he had said, "If we do…he will more than likely die immediately. Your husband is going to live the rest of his life, however long or short that my be, with a large jagged shard of coal imbedded in his brain."

The doctors had done everything that they could. They had run endless hours of tests….performed scans….and still they weren't any closer to knowing what had happened to Walter than when they started. And they still didn't know why he was alive.

At least some good news was coming her way. Since the accident, she had been barraged by a mob of lawyers who wanted to represent her. She had researched them all…and picked the ones who were the most bloodthirsty. She was out for all that she could get. Her lawyers assured her that the coal mine was to blame….faulty conditions, shoddy practices, and even more that could shut them down or, even worse, land some of the top officials in prison. They were more than ready to settle out of court…keep it all hush hush. And Mary was willing to work with them….for a price. For a very ***large*** price.

All of Walter's medical bills were being taken care of by the mining company. And yesterday, she had been able to deposit a very large sum of money into her bank account. The first of many. So….for that…she could put up with all the drama of the last three weeks. She could put up with a lot of things.

Stubbing out her cigarette and walking back into the hospital, she made her way back toward the elevator. She needed to get to Walter. She wanted to be

there in case…*when*…he woke up. She heard someone weeping softly in the chapel as she passed by. She could have stopped….seen if she could have offered some solace….a shoulder to cry on. But she didn't. She had her own troubles to worry about. And she didn't care if it was God and Jesus or the God of the Honky Tonk….she would pray to whichever god would help her out right now.

She just wanted Walter to come out of his coma…and then they could get on with their life. Heck…she could even learn to live with that eye. She would buy him a patch. Right now…she could afford to buy him a million patches!

As she stepped off the elevator, she took a deep breath to steady herself. She didn't see the night nurse on duty at her desk. She must be off in one of the rooms helping a patient. Surprising. Mary didn't have very high regard for her. She seemed rather lazy. Maybe that was why she was on the skeleton crew.

Just then she heard a shrill scream come from down the hall. It was very high pitched…a woman. And it cut off very quickly…snuffed out. But what got Mary's heart pumping was the fact that it had come from Walter's room!

She started running toward his room. She wasn't sure what she was going to find….but she was afraid to find out. And she was afraid not to know.

Mary tore into Walter's room, sure that she would find him dead. The shrill scream had come from this room, she was sure of it. It must have been the missing night nurse. But she was surprised when she didn't see the night nurse. She only saw Walter….and praise be! He was sitting up on the edge of his bed! He was awake.

He was staring at the floor, as if he wasn't sure what it was. Slowly Mary walked over to him. She wasn't sure if he would recognize her or not.

"Walter?" she asked quietly, "It's me…Mary."

Walter raised his head…and thank God….his eyes were both back to normal. His face was full of worry and confusion. He stared at her for a minute…and then slow recognition spread across his face. He began to smile! It was the most beautiful sight that she had ever seen.

"Mary?" he asked, "Oh Mary!"

And then all words were lost to her. They were hugging…and crying…and sobbing openly with loud, wordless heaves. Mary was so happy. Her Walter was back with her…and from the looks of it, he was going to be okay. Even his eye…the one which had been as dark as coal…was back as normal.

Mary finally broke free of Walter's grasp and took his head in her hands. Giving him a quick kiss, she said, "Now Walter…you stay right here in bed. I'm going to run and grab a doctor…nurse…somebody!"

Walter nodded and lay back down on the bed. Mary turned heel and quickly sprinted out into the hallway. Where was the night nurse? Where was anyone? The nurse's station was empty, so she ran on down the hallway. She turned the corner…and ran smack into Doctor Franklin! He took two steps back…stumbling over his paperwork he had been reading.

"Mary?" he asked with concern, "Is everything alright?"

"No…I mean yes!" she cried, "Walter! It's Walter! He's awake! I couldn't find anyone so I was just running until I found someone….anyone…you!"

"Calm down," Doctor Franklin smiled, his eyes crinkling, "If Walter is awake..that's a good thing. Although I'm sure that Sally, the night nurse, is aware of it already."

"That's just it," Mary said, taking Doctor Franklin's hand, "I can't find her. Please…come and look at Walter! He's awake! He's back to normal!"

Mary and Doctor Franklin quickly made their way back to Walter's room. He stated that it was lucky that he was working the night shift tonight.

As they passed the nurse's station, a madly ringing phone greeted them. It appeared that Sally, the night nurse, was still nowhere to be found. But Mary wasn't concerned over some lazy nurse who had run off somewhere….probably with a janitor or intern somewhere in a supply closet! She was too worried about Walter.

For a second, she was sure that Walter was back in his coma. He was just laying there when they made their way into the room. But then, he opened his eyes…both of which were still normal…and slowly sat up.

Doctor Franklin took out his pen light and made his way over to Walter's bed.

"Mr. Jones?" he asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Well," Walter croaked dryly in a harsh voice, "I've felt better….but I have to say…I've felt worse."

Mary started to cry again. Walter was back. He was back.

Doctor Franklin made Walter follow the pen light with his eyes. He checked his blood pressure. He listened to his heart. And then he checked the wound in the back of Walter's head. Mary knew that this wasn't just any wound. It was the jagged piece of coal that was imbedded in Walter's head…in his brain. It

would be there for the rest of his life. The doctors had said that Walter would have to have a piece of plastic over it to protect it when he healed up.

Doctor Franklin made Walter lay back down and then came over to speak with Mary.

"Well…as of now…he seems to be doing fine," he said, "But I don't want to give you a false sense of hope. His condition is still very serious. For God's sake…he has a large piece of coal in his head…his brain! The truth is…we don't really know what kind of effect this is going to have on him."

"What do you mean doctor?" Mary asked.

"Just that you shouldn't be too surprised if he goes back into a coma…or worse…at any moment," Doctor Franklin said, "But still…he seems to be doing fine right now. Let's just take this one day at a time. I want to run another round of tests in the morning."

Mary nodded her agreement, and Doctor Franklin left to find Sally, the missing night nurse. Mary walked back over to Walter. He was asleep again. But it was a good sleep…a "I'm still there" sleep and not the coma state that he had been in. Mary sat down in the chair that sat beside Walter's bed. She wouldn't be able to sleep tonight. She would just watch him sleep.

As soon as she sat down, she felt something pinch her on her behind. She jumped up…thinking for a second that it was a misplaced needle or something.

It was a ring.

Bending down, she picked up the expensive-looking diamond ring that had been lying on the chair. Where had it come from? Just then, Walter mumbled in his sleep. Without thinking about anything else, Mary slipped the ring into her pocket. She would worry about it later. Right now…all that mattered was Walter.

***

Walter Jones was walking down a cold, dark tunnel. For a second, he thought that maybe he was still in the mine…the cave-in had trapped him…had trapped them all. But no….that couldn't be right. He had been saved. Pulled from the mine just when he thought that all was lost, he had been so relieved to wake up in the hospital with Mary by his side.

But Mary wasn't the first person you saw when you woke up, came a voice from his left, *and you know it.*

Walter's head jerked in that direction, "Who's there?"

But of course, there was no answer.

He tried to remember that day….the day of the cave-in. What had happened? Something about a rock wall….what had it been?

"Hey Walter!" one of the guys had yelled out, "Come and look at this!"

A bunch of them had been standing in the far back part of the mine looking at something. As Walter walked toward them, he saw that something was indeed different. The seam of coal that they had been following seemed to grow larger and larger the deeper they went. And then…it ended. And it didn't just peter out….it ended all at once. But that wasn't the strangest thing of all.

"What do you think it is?" one of the guys had asked…had it been Kenneth? He couldn't remember but he thought that it might have been.

The coal ended at a large slab of rock that they had uncovered. But not just any rock.

"Would you look at that?" Walter had said, astonished at what he was looking at.

The wall was full of strange, dark carvings. At first, he thought that it might have just been one of the guys…fooling around….trying to play a prank. But this wasn't just some random gibberish. It was different…more detailed. He had seen a show on TLC once about the ancient Mayans. On it, they had shown ancient ruins and carvings. This looked something like that. What had they discovered?

"Look down there," Walter had said, pointing to the bottom of the wall. The writings ended…and there at the bottom was a picture of some kind. It looked like some kind of beast…not a deer or buffalo….something larger. Something with horns. Something with lots and lots of teeth. Something dark.

Walter had bent down to brush some of the coal dust from it. And as his fingers touched the rock wall…everything had gone dark…..as dark as coal. And then the screams had started.

What had happened?

Walter tried to remember. His head started to hurt. Had something fallen on his head? He reached up and touched the back of his head. His fingers brushed up against the shard of coal that was imbedded in his head. A sharp jab of pain shot through his entire cranium.

You might not want to do that, the voice beside of him came floating out of the darkness again, *If you want to live..that is*.

Walter closed his eyes, although he didn't know why. It was so dark in here. And then he remembered….there had been….screams?

Yes…he was pretty sure that there had been screams….and then the ground had been shaking. And

then….the screams had stopped. There had only been silence…and darkness. Had they all died in there…had he?

Now Walter…if you had died….how would you still be here? the voice whispered.

Walter groaned. His head hurt. His eyes hurt. And he didn't want to think anymore. He didn't want to remember….what had happened in the tunnel. How he had survived. How he had been so hungry….for so long. What he had done…and eaten.

I'm hungry right now Walter, the voice slithered around him like a cold wind, *It's time to eat.*

"But you just ate!" Walter cried out, "Not again..not now…it's too soon!"

The pain in his head increased making him cry out in agony. He dropped to his knees in the darkness. *I SAID….I'M HUNGRY!*

And in the darkness of the hospital room, Walter's eyes opened. If his wife Mary had been awake at the moment…she wouldn't have been pleased. She would have been very concerned. Both of Walter's eyes were pitch black.

"Let's go eat," he whispered.

***

Megan Whitely had the shakes again. Standing outside the hospital doors, she tried to look as sick as possible…which wasn't too hard for her to do. A bad drug habit will work wonders on a person's body…and not in a good way. It had started with alcohol…then some good old Mary Jane…and then heroine. Now…it was whatever she could get her hands on. Usually she got them off of her boyfriend..but they had broken up.

He had started to lose interest when she had started to lose her teeth.

Megan tried to control her shaking. She didn't want to appear to be a total pill-head. But some friends of hers had had some success in scoring a pill or two at the hospital before. They had told her who to talk to…how much money to bring. There was always someone who needed a little extra cash. Not that she had much cash to give. She had stolen some off of Hank, her ex-boyfriend, just before he left. She had pawned her son's Wii system to get the rest.

Trying to mix in with the crowd, she stole her way through the side door and made her way down the mostly empty hallway. There weren't too many people working this late at night…just a bare bones staff. But she was looking for Billy…the night janitor. According to her friends, he was always good for a little "pick me up." And she really needed picking up right now. Where could he be?

She rounded the corner and saw a security guard walking toward her. Snaking back around the corner, she dived into the stairway. It was dim in the stairway…not all of the lights were working. Her heart was beating wildly in her chest. She didn't need to be nabbed by some dumb old rent-a-cop right now. She was sure that he hadn't seen her….she hoped.

But what if he did, she thought, *he could be out there right now…calling the cops to come and get you.*

"Stop it," she muttered to herself, trying to control her breathing, "He didn't see a thing."

She would wait here for a few minutes just to be sure that he was gone…and then she would look for Billy again. If she could hold out that long. She was really starting to feel sick.

Something scraped on the floor behind her.

Stifling the scream that had come tearing up from her lungs, she whirled around. The staircase ended behind her. Underneath it…there was only darkness. It had sounded like something had moved under there.

"Is there someone here?" she hissed through her missing teeth.

Nothing. Not one sound.

"Billy?" she hoped that it was him. She could get her fix and get the heck out of this creepy place. She never realized just how spooky a hospital at night could be.

And then the darkness moved. Something…someone…came shuffling out of it toward her. It was a man…a patient. His hospital gown was flapping along behind him.

"Jeez mister," she tried to crack a smile with her ruined mouth, "You really scared me. Are you lost?"

The man didn't say anything. He was staring at the floor like he didn't know where he was.

Great, she thought, *an escapee from the mental ward. Just my luck. Well….I'm not getting involved. I'm getting the heck….*

And then he looked up into her face…and she saw his eyes. His dark, dark eyes that burned with a cold, black fire. And she found that she couldn't move….she couldn't blink….couldn't even breathe.

"I'm hungry," the man whispered in a rough, low voice…almost a grunt. And then he started to walk toward her.

She tried to scream….but no sound came from her mouth. She couldn't look away…even when he started to feed. But she could feel the pain…..oh God! She could feel the pain!

Large tubes streamed out of the man's mouth and gouged themselves into her stomach….sucking and

pulling. She could feel small teeth at the ends of the tubes start to eat their way into her guts…tearing and crunching.

Red pain tried to push her down to her knees…but the force of the tubes kept her upright. They jerked her body from side to side…trying to get to the juiciest parts of her insides.

Other tubes had erupted from the man's ears. These sprang toward her and impaled her neck…right at the jugular vein. Hot blood spurted out…but not a drop touched the floor. Other tongue-like tubes sprang from the man's skin and lapped up the drops in mid-air.

She tried to scream. The agony of being eaten alive was unbearable. A large cramp hit her as the thing continued to eat into her intestines. She smelled a stench and realized that it was her. She could smell herself being eaten. The last thing she saw was two more large tubes erupt from the man's eyes. And then…they impaled her own eyes….eating them before continuing on to gnaw their way into her brain.

Finally….death came to her.

And still the crunching and slurping and sucking continued.

***

Mary Jones was walking with Jesus. They were at the Fayette Mall, and Jesus was going on and on about the sale on jeans at the Gap. Mary thought this was really weird. When did Jesus start wearing jeans? But Mary was nice enough not to say anything. He ***was*** the Lord, after all.

They stopped off at Drinks 'n Things for a slushie. Mary got a blueberry. Jesus just got a water…but then

turned his into a cherry slushie afterwards. Then he turned to Mary.

"Listen to me Mary," he said, "There is something wrong with Walter."

"What do you mean?" Mary asked. Only now, she wasn't talking to Jesus anymore. She was talking to a life-size Pillsbury Dough Boy. He was slurping his cherry slushie down so fast that it was dribbling a red stain down his chest. It looked like blood.

"You know what I mean," the Dough Boy said, "He isn't Walter anymore. He's….well…let's just say that he is something else. Walter is still in there…for the moment. But the other one is getting stronger."

"The other one….and who would that be," Mary asked.

"You know," the Dough Boy said, "He has been called many names…but has no true name. The One Who Has No Name."

And then he pointed off into the distance. Mary was suddenly aware that they weren't in a mall anymore. They were in a coal mine. And in the distance she saw a dark, twisting shape that was full of teeth and long stringing tubes. Gurgling loudly, it started making its way hungrily toward her. Startled, she looked back over to the Dough Boy. He was gone. So was Jesus.

It was just her….all alone…with the Beast. Sharp teeth touched her arm.

With a jolt, Mary awoke. Disoriented from the dream, she didn't know where she was for a moment. And then she realized that she was still in the hospital, next to Walter's bed.

Walter's empty bed. He was gone! While she had slept, Walter had gotten up and walked off!

Suddenly alarmed, she jumped up and ran out into the hallway. Where could he have gone? Why?

Nobody was in the hallway. She hadn't half expected there to be anyone, but her heart still sank. Running past the nurses' station, she heard the phone ringing off the hook and realized that the night nurse hadn't shown up yet.

I wonder where she is, Mary thought as she continued scanning the hallways and doors for Walter. If the place was going to be this lackluster about their personnel then Mary was going to start looking for another hospital for Walter.

People, tired and haggard looking from lack of sleep, turned to look at her as she ran from doorway to doorway. They probably thought that she was crazy. Let them. Maybe she was a little crazy. It was that dream. That crazy dream. What had caused that? Probably that nasty hospital cafeteria lasagna that she had eaten earlier. Her stomach churned at the thought.

Yet still, there was no sign of Walter.

"Dear God," she prayed, "Please…please help me find him. Help me find my Walter."

Taking a sharp corner, she saw a security guard who gave her a strange look.

"Can I help you ma'am?" he asked, absent-mindedly reaching for his club. He didn't appear to want to take any chances with this wild-looking woman.

"My husband," Mary managed to croak out in a voice so raspy that even she was shocked at its sound, "I can't find my husband."

The guard relaxed. He smiled reassuringly.

"Don't worry ma'am," he said, "I'm sure he's around here somewhere. This hospital isn't that big. Maybe he stepped outside to smoke?"

Mary didn't bother to let him know that her husband was a patient…or that he had stopped smoking 6 years earlier. She just nodded and ran on, leaving the guard behind. He just scratched his head and shrugged.

"Females," he muttered to himself.

As she neared the front entrance, Mary passed the stairs. On a whim, she turned and slammed through the stairway door. And there was Walter!

Thank you God, her mind sent up a prayer.

Only he wasn't alone.

Her hands went to her mouth to cover her silent scream as she watched the large black tubes suck up the rest of the bloody mess that was on the floor. What looked like a finger was the last thing to go. A tube sucked it up and into Walter's mouth. With a loud crunch, he chewed it up…bones and all…and swallowed. Then he turned to face Mary. And his eyes…..oh God…his eyes! Dark as coal…and yet alive with an inner fire!

"Delicious," Walter hissed, his eyes reflecting the light into a million prisms of darkness.

He started to walk toward her, his hands stretched out grotesquely like he wanted a hug….but Mary knew better. She wanted to run but couldn't. The eyes…they froze her in place. Even her screams wouldn't come.

"And now…for desert," Walter grinned with a mouthful of fangs that glistened with drool and blood.

Mary froze as Walter slowly made his way toward her. At least, the creature had once been her husband. Now, it was just a slobbering pile of tubes, quivering greedily in her direction. Tubes full of sharp teeth. Drool and blood were dripping from the fangs of the beast as it drew closer. Mary didn't have to ask where

the blood had come from. She had just witnessed it eating the remains of some other poor soul.

"Help!" she screamed out. At least…that is what she wanted to do. But she could do little more than make a whimper. The black stare of the monster froze her in her tracks and made any voluntary muscle movement impossible. A tear of fright ran down her left cheek. She didn't want to die! Not like this!

As if in response to her fright, her muscles suddenly found the strength to move. With a shriek, she bolted past the creature and up the stairs. It was the only way out! She had to get to someone who could help her…and maybe help Walter, if he was still alive in there somewhere.

She heard a roar of rage behind her and knew that the creature was following close behind. Her legs suddenly felt like water, and they wanted to buckle underneath her.

Don't you dare fall down, her mind screamed out. If she did, she was dead!

But she made it. Somehow she found the strength to push on to the top. Busting through the double doors at the top of the stairs, she expected to find help. To her horror, she found herself in a dark part of the hospital. There was nobody around!

A sign on the desk in front of her told her everything.

Excuse Our Mess
We Are Remodeling!

For a second she thought that she still might have a chance to get back into the stairs and make it to another floor. When she turned to leave though, she screamed out. Walter's face was in the window of the

door. He was staring at her with eyes as black as coal. With a shriek, she turned and ran down the dark hallway. She had to find a place to hide.

The smell of strong chemicals burned her nose. They were stripping the wax off of the floors in these rooms. The smell was strong. Too strong. She felt woozy as she breathed in the stench.

Running into a room filled with stored furniture, she looked for a place to hide.

***

The creature made its way slowly down the dark hallway. It was still hungry. It could smell its prey up ahead in the dark.

Don't touch her, a voice rang out in its brain, *Don't hurt Mary.*

For a second, the creature paused. Perhaps it should leave and find some other tasty treat. It craved blood. But in the end, the thrill of the chase won out. It liked to track its food. It liked the smell of fear. It liked it when they screamed.

Tracking slowly onward, it listened for any small sound. Not that it needed to hear. It could smell the female. Her fear had a powerful stench that was easily recognizable. It made the creature's mouth water. How delightful this was going to be!

It took another sniff. Suddenly, it became aware of another smell...a strong chemical smell...that was blocking all the other scents. It couldn't smell the female anymore!

With a roar, it stopped to sniff some more. But with each new breath, only the stench of the strong chemicals filled its nose. But no matter. It would find

the female. It would find her….and kill her. Slowly. This was going to be a treat.

It would just have to listen very closely. It loved the chase. It would not give up.

***

Mary hunkered underneath a desk that had been stored away while the rest of the floor was being remodeled. She had just been able to crawl into the tiny space underneath it. She couldn't see much in the darkness of the room, but she could still see a little bit of the floor. She saw the creature's feet as it slowly opened the door and entered the room

She took a breath and held it. She was afraid that her ragged breathing would tell the monster exactly where she was. She saw one of the creature's tubes full of teeth dragging on the floor beside it. It shuffled its feet as it made its way into the room

"Mary?" she heard Walter's voice call out, "Mary…it's okay now. I'm better. The monster….it's….it's gone."

For a second, she almost cried out with joy at hearing his voice. But then she saw that quivering tentacle on the floor. It was moving around…trying to sniff out where she was. And she knew. Walter wasn't there. It was the monster!

"Mary…..darling?" the creature continued to mimic her husband's voice, "Come out. I'm….I'm sick. I need help. Mary….please!"

Mary closed her eyes. Tears started to form in the corners as she wept for her husband. What in the hell had happened to him? She said a silent prayer.

Please God, get me out of this.

When she opened her eyes again, she didn't see Walter's feet anywhere! He had moved on. She looked around but didn't see them. Had he left?

She lay there silently...listening. She didn't hear anything. Wait...what was that? Did she hear something fall in one of the other rooms? It seemed to her that she did. Maybe she could get back to the stairs!

Crawling out from underneath the desk, she scanned the room. It was dark, but she couldn't make out any moving shapes. She didn't see anything at all. Slowly, she started making her way toward the door. She had to try to get away...get to help!

Slow and easy, girl, she kept repeating to herself, *Slow and easy. Get to those stairs.*

She almost made it. She would have made it if it hadn't been for some spare bedpans that had been stacked carelessly near the door. Her foot caught the edge of them and with a loud CRASH, they hit the floor, scattering all around her.

In an instant, she heard a roar. And in the darkness she heard footsteps racing toward her. It was the creature!

With a shriek, she ran toward the light of the staircase. She just had to make it here...had to get there.

Something wrapped around her foot, making her fall facedown onto the floor. She cried out in pain as her lip split open on the hard tile. She tasted blood. She felt sharp bites from the creature's tentacles as it wrapped tighter around her ankle.

Turning over, she saw that there was no escape. The monster stood over her. Large tubes and tentacles were waving around in all directions. She saw that each one was full of teeth. All of them were drooling

and gnashing together hungrily. It was over. She had lost.

She looked at what had once been her loving husband and sent all the love that she had left inside toward him. She took a deep breath and managed to croak out three simple words.

"I love you," she whispered.

A tube that ran out of Walter's ears latched onto her arm, digging its way inside. She felt the searing pain and heard a spatter as her blood began to flow onto the floor. She sensed other tubes whisking their way to the floor to greedily lap it up. Another tube, this one running from Walter's mouth, drew back...and prepared to impale her face. She tried to close her eyes...but couldn't. She didn't want to see what was about to happen to her...but she couldn't do anything about it.

And then...the beast stopped. The tubes fell limply to the floor. The one that was digging its way into her arm pulled out with a pop. A sharp wave of pain shot up her arm and into her chest. She found that she was free....and she cried out in pain and clutched her arm, trying to stop the gush of blood.

The creature shook its head violently. Blood and snot flew everywhere. It let out a roar that seemed to come from its guts.

"Noooooo," it bellowed, a deep angry voice that mixed with Walter's voice, "Not her.....never herrrrrr. Noooooooo!"

"Oh Walter," she cried out, wanting to go to him...hug him...but not able to as she lay on the floor, "I love you Walter."

The demonic monster looked at her with eyes...eyes as black as coal...and for one brief moment, she saw Walter looking out of those eyes.

"And....and I...." it tried to form words around the drooling tubes that hung lifelessly out of its mouth, "I....luff...youuuuuuu."

With another screech, it turned and raced to the staircase doors. Mary struggled to her feet, her knees and back crying out in sharp pain. She realized that she had to follow the beast...had to find out what was going to happen to Walter...her Walter.

"Walter!" she cried out. "Wait!"

She didn't really know what to do. She just knew that Walter was still in there...still alive. She followed the bellows of rage and pain...and the trail of gooey, bloody ooze down another set of stairs behind the door that Walter had darted through. These steps led down....down into the dark basement of the hospital.

Every instinct in her body was telling her to turn around...to get out...to escape. Still, she ran after the monster that was also her husband.

***

It was so hot in the basement. And steamy. The hospital was old...and it heated the place with steam.

Of course the basement would be hot....they had a huge boiler that was powered by....

And then she knew...knew where Walter was going. Knew what he would want to do. She cried out and ran after him even faster.

"Walter! NO!" she screamed, "There must be some other way. We can fight this! We can get you some help. Walter please! Listen to me!"

She turned a sharp corner and saw that it was already too late. Walter was standing in front of the large furnace that powered the hospital's boiler. He had pried the door open with his many tubes...searing the

ends of several of them. The smell of rotten, burnt flesh hung heavy in the air.

Mary stopped. Crying she held out her arms toward Walter...but she knew....deep down inside, she knew that it was too late.

The horror which had once been the man she loved turned to look at her one last time. Mary saw one large, black tear run down his face. Then with a scream of pain, Walter flung himself into the furnace...using one of the tubes to pull the door shut behind him.

The flames of the furnace shot up....licking hungrily at their new prey. Through the iron bars, Mary watched in shock as it began to burn. The parts that were still a little bit Walter seemed to melt away....leaving a mass of tentacles and teeth behind. The creature screeched in pain and tried to claw its way out of the fire. But a creature born in coal didn't stand much of a chance.

Like coal, it burned hot and true...and in a matter of mere seconds...the creature exploded in a fireball of light and heat. Mary raised her arms to shield her face and felt small blisters start to form on the tender underside. She blinked several times to get rid of the afterimage that had burned itself onto her retinas. And then she looked back at the furnace.....the empty furnace. Walter was gone.

***

Two days later, the rains began. It was a dry time of year and everyone was welcome of the rain. It would be good for the wells. Plus, it would wash away some of the dust and smoke that had been lingering in the air recently. Large black flumes of smoke had belched out

of the hospitals furnace a couple of day before...and had been hanging in the air....acrid and strong.

Karen Hudson was making a sandwich when the rain started. At first she was overjoyed as the rain pelted her kitchen window. And then she saw them...her two little girls playing outside in the rain. But no...they weren't playing. They were just standing there.

"Dang it if they aren't the stupidest girls ever," Karen muttered angrily to herself, "I sometimes wish I didn't have kids...so much trouble."

She stomped out on the porch, "Kelly! Beth! GET OVER HERE NOW! What are you doing out in this mess! And don't even think of coming in the house all wet like that! I don't clean all day just for you two to make a big...."

And then she stopped. She stopped because there was something wrong with her little girls...her little girls who had been standing in the rain when it began to fall...through the thick black clouds of smoke that still hung in the air from the hospital furnace.

Their eyes! Oh God! Their eyes were as black as coal. And tubes were starting to sprout from their little mouths...from their ears....nose.....even their skin.

And then they spoke...in unison...

"I'm hungry."

They both began to walk toward their mother. She couldn't move.

She never moved again....even when they began to feed.

Ruby

The day was like a thousand other days before it. It was a Wednesday. Nothing special. The red sun hung low in the western summer sky. It was a tired sun shining down on a world grown weary in the haze of the late July humidity.

In a field far below sat a gray and weathered barn. The barn wasn't affected by the heat but still longed for the coming night. It grew rather bored during the day and longed for the rapid scurrying of the mice that would awaken at dusk. It stared at the world with old eyes and tried to remember the sounds of sheep and cows. That had been decades ago when the land around it had been a working farm. Now, the only sounds were the creaking of trees and the rustling of the wind through the tall Kentucky grasses.

As the sun sank lower in the sky, the shadows that had lain hidden in the surrounding hills began their slow, lazy stretch. Darkness would soon reclaim the land as her own. The creatures of darkness would awaken and the night would come alive, trying in vain to drive away the memory of the daylight.

But for the moment, the light was still clinging to the ground, digging in sharp claws and struggling against the inevitability of time. It was a fight that was eons old and still continued. It will continue until time itself ceases to exist.

Since the time was not right for the mice to be moving about, the barn was quite surprised to sense movement within its walls. Something was rooting about…shuffling into the gloom that had once been home to a sheep named Hank and various cows that had either been milked or slaughtered for their meat and therefore remained unnamed. The barn sat quietly, amazed at this change in its daily routine. It sat…and watched.

***

The figure slid quietly from the tall grass and stole quietly into the barn. It had lain in wait throughout the day in the dark hills and hollows that surrounded the land. It had waited…patiently…for the harsh burning sun of day to relinquish his throne to the lovely white goddess of the moon. Now, he could sense the coming of night…could feel it in how the burning in his flesh changed from a fierce pain to a dull electric throb which wasn't entirely unpleasant. The pain didn't stop…it never stopped. It just grew less intense. Sometimes….quite pleasurable.

But that was for the future…for the night. For now, it was still time to wait….to watch. The shadow found a dark corner of the barn and curled itself into a tight ball. Soon, full darkness would come. Until then…it would be patient.

***

Ruby Ann Miller looked at her reflection in the mirror. She sighed and brushed a lock of dark brown hair out of her face. She wasn't bad looking, she reckoned. Most people would say that she was rather cute. So why hadn't Joe called her back yet?

As a waitress at Jax, one of Jackson's two bars since Breathitt County had gone wet two years ago, Ruby was familiar with how men were. They told you that they loved you with one side of their mouth while they were kissing someone else with the other side. But Joe had seemed so real….so interested in her. Of course, their date had only been two days ago. Maybe she was just being paranoid.

She sighed and stared hard at her face. Were the wrinkles under her eyes always that deep? She was only 23, but she seemed to be much older. She really needed to get more sleep. Of course, being a waitress in a bar didn't make for the best hours. She was lucky to get home by 3 am. And she had been working double shifts lately ever since Tabitha Fraley had run off and eloped with that ox of a boyfriend that she had been dating since high school. She had called from Vegas to say that she wouldn't be back. From ***Vegas*** for God's sake! How much of a cliché could she have been?

Applying a shade of lipstick that was just a little too red and a smear of eye shadow that was just a little too blue, Ruby quickly finished dressing for work. She needed to leave a little bit early tonight. She was going to drive out to Hardshell and visit her grandmother. She hadn't been out to see Gran for about two weeks. Ruby was the only grandchild that Gran had, and she just wanted to make sure that she was okay. Plus, Ruby had a few groceries and things that she wanted to

leave for Gran…including a jar of moonshine that she had bought off old Charlie Fugate, one of the regulars at the bar. Gran wasn't much of a drinker, but she really loved her shine. Of course, she said that it was for *medicinal* purposes only. As if.

Ruby smiled to herself as she threw on her favorite scarlet jacket and grabbed the keys to her Ford Focus. She was really looking forward to seeing Gran. Things had been hectic at work…and now this mess with Joe. She just needed someone to talk to. Gran was always ready to lend an ear. Ruby quickly grabbed the sack of groceries that was sitting on the kitchen table and headed out the door. She hoped that her Focus would make it. It had been acting up recently. About two weeks ago, the check engine light had come on. She had taken it in to Breathitt County Tire, but they had told her that it was probably just a sensor in the gas tank…nothing to worry about. So far, it had been running okay.

Slipping the key into the ignition, she thought that she heard the phone ringing inside the house. For a second, she almost ran back inside. What if it was Joe? Then she thought better of it and started up the car. She almost hoped it was Joe. It would serve him right. He could sweat it out for a while. Whistling softly to herself, Ruby drove out of her driveway and headed south on Highway 15.

The hills of southeastern Kentucky spread out in a joyless sprawl in the overbearing heat of a late July afternoon. Hwy. 476 cut a dark gray ribbon through the land. It was a swerving, curving bit of a road which would make most people from outside Breathitt County rather ill. For Ruby, however, this road was burned into her mind from countless trips both in a school bus (earlier times) and then a car (later times). She felt as

though she could drive this road in the pitch dark with her headlights turned off. It was just a curve to the left here and a sharp turn to the right there….and then repeat.

Ruby sighed and glanced at her reflection in the rearview mirror of her black Ford Focus. She looked as tired as she felt. Hopefully a visit to Gran would make her feel better. The groceries that she was taking to her Gran rustled in the backseat, longing to break free of their plastic prison and scatter into the floor. She had carefully tucked the jar of moonshine under the passenger seat. She didn't want to take any chances. Just because Breathitt County had made the sale of alcohol legal over two years ago, the sale of homemade shine was still illegal.

She looked around as she drove up the old, familiar road. She hadn't been to visit Gran in over a month, and she was amazed at how much the landscape had changed. In early June, everything had seemed so warm and inviting as the warm sunshine of an emerging summer had painted the area with a sense of joy. Now, the oppressive heat of late July gave everything a wilted, stunted look. She didn't see anyone or anything out, which was weird for the area. She didn't even see any dogs. It seemed as though everyone was inside their homes, enjoying artificially chilled air. Maybe even the dogs. She smiled to herself at that thought.

Making a sharp turn in the road, she saw the young boy standing in the road in front of her. At first, she wasn't sure of what she was seeing. It just looked like a dark shadow of a figure, standing in the middle of Hwy. 476 and staring at her car as it quickly bore down on him. It took a second for the message to travel from her eyes to her brain to her feet. Pushing sharply on

her brake, Ruby forced her car to come to a screeching halt just a few feet in front of the child.

Oh my God, she thought, *What if I had hit him! What in the hell is a boy his age doing out here in the road anyway? Oh my God!*

Breathing sharply with the surge of panic energy that was coursing through her blood, Ruby felt her face start to flush with rage. The boy didn't look to be any older than seven. Where were his parents? Probably inside in front of the air conditioner. She quickly pulled over to the side of the road so that she wouldn't be smashed by a coal truck. Slowly, she got out of the car.

"Sweetie?" she asked in as nice a way as her shaky voice would allow, "Are you okay? You really shouldn't be playing in the middle of the road."

The boy looked up at her. She saw right away that something wasn't right. He was looking toward her, but his eyes weren't focusing on her. Instead, it seemed as though his eyes were looking through her. She started walking toward him.

"Are you okay?" she asked. The heat was a raging beast around them. She knew that if he had been outside for some time then he could be suffering from heat exhaustion. She knelt down in front of him. She could see now that his breathing was rapid…and shallow. He was wheezing slightly…and still staring off into the distance. He was staring up into the hills behind her.

"You okay sugar?" she asked again, putting one hand on his left shoulder. She noticed that he was trembling. Like a crazed parrot that keeps saying the same thing over and over, she was getting ready to ask him once again if he was okay when he suddenly started screaming and clawing at her. She quickly jumped up but kept her hands on his shoulders so that

he wouldn't run away. She noticed that he was still staring off into the distance. But now he was like a wild animal. She needed to get him off the road. What if something came flying around the curve?

"Hey!" came a sharp voice across the road, "What in the heck do you think ya' doin' with my lil' boy?"

Ruby turned her head toward the voice and saw that it belonged to a woman standing in front of a large, rusty trailer. The woman had to be at least 450 pounds. Her hair hung like a greasy mop in strings which ran down her sides. She was dressed in a large purple muumuu which was stained with grease, snot, and other dark substances which Ruby could only guess at. The woman was munching on a large slice of pizza which probably explained the explosion of large red pimples which covered her face. She used her pizza-free hand to wave toward Ruby again.

"Get yer' dang hands off my kid!" the woman screamed out, bits of pizza flying out of her mouth, "You from Social Services? Those people just won't give up…will they?"

Ruby was in shock. She felt as though she were staring at some circus freak…not an actual person. She forced her mouth to move and heard her voice, sounding squeaky and small, come out in spurts and stutters.

"I was driving…and your kid….um…your little boy….in the road," she was starting to lose it. She could hear the child still screaming…but it sounded like it was coming from a million miles away.

The woman waddled out into the road. Ruby saw that she wasn't wearing any shoes and that her feet had a squashed and filthy look to them. Her toenails were long and yellow. The woman came closer and Ruby

could smell her coming. With a fat, greasy hand, the woman smacked the boy on the back of the head.

"Get in the house!" the woman screamed, her voice sounding like it should come from a bull instead of person, "You want them to take you away again? HUH?"

Again? Ruby thought, *What kind of home is this?*

The boy, still screaming and now crying as well, ran across the hot blacktop and into the trailer, letting the door slam shut behind him. Ruby could still hear him inside the trailer.

"And you….little missy," the woman had a short, pudgy finger stuck in Ruby's face, "Keep your nose out of other people's business. I don't need any more trouble with Social Services. What are you all tryin' to do anyway? Cut me off my food stamps? My check? Who do you think you are? Do you even have any kids? I won't lose him. I'll kill you all first."

The woman waddled back across the road, leaving Ruby standing there in a fog. She called out to the woman, "I'm…I'm not from Social Services. Your little boy was standing in the road. I was concerned."

"Yeah, I can see that….the whole damn world is full of people who are concerned," the woman yelled back, picking up a rock from her front yard, "Go on, get outta' here. I don't need trouble! And you look like trouble…all tarted up like some tramp. Get outta' here 'fore I chuck this rock through your car window!"

Ruby stared…amazed at the ignorance of this cow. For a moment, she thought about going at her. But she knew that she would lose. The woman was built like a linebacker. Instead, she just took a deep breath and headed back to her car. Driving off, she made a mental note of the trailer. Social Services would definitely be getting a call.

In the barn across the road, the dark shadow paced restlessly….a low growl coming from his throat. The child had been so close….so close that the shadow had caught the sweet scent of child flesh. So sweet. Now…it was gone. The spell had been weak…the day was still strong…and now it was broken and the boy had run away.

And that woman…she had interfered. The shadow tracked the car from the cracks in the barns walls. It watched and waited as the darkness grew in the air around it. Soon it would be able to leave the barn….and the chase would begin.

***

Brenda Jones watched from the grimy, fingerprint-covered door of her trailer as the little Ford Focus drove out of sight. The nerve of some people! She smirked as she finished shutting the door and returned to her first love…the rest of the Variety Pizza that she had been shoveling into her face before that woman had stopped outside. She flopped down, almost sitting on the pizza. Little balls of dust flew up in the air. She waved them away lazily with one large grease-stained hand. She really needed to hire someone to clean this place up.

She had told that woman off though. At first, Brenda had been afraid that it was Social Services again. She didn't need that trouble anymore. Lord knew that she was just barely making it right now with her welfare and food stamps. She didn't need that taken away.

Her no-good-for-nothing husband had run off with some blonde three years ago, and she hadn't seen

him since. Not that she missed him much, but it was still nice to have a man around the house. Especially when she had to deal with the little brat. She could hear him sniveling in the back bedroom. God…she hated kids. Especially her own.

"Shut up back there!" she bawled out, spewing chunks of sausage and cheese on her purple muumuu. She brushed them into the floor. Maybe she could get a dog or something…it could at least eat some of the crumbs. She looked down at her People magazine. Angelina Jolie was on the cover. That woman had adopted like 3 kids….and then had some more. She didn't know what was wrong with some people. But that hunk of a man of hers probably made it all worth it. Brenda thought that she could possibly put up with 4 or 5 screaming brats if she had something like Brad Pitt to look at all the time. He would be much better than that lazy do-nothing husband that she had married right out of high school. Of course, they had ***had*** to get married…thanks to the brat.

She could still hear him crying in the back. It was really starting to get on her nerves. She was trying to focus on *The Best of Jerry Springer* that she had rented at Movie Gallery. She just loved that show. She half expected to see her husband on it one day. Lord knows that that little blonde that he had run off with was just trash. Not a good God-fearing Christian woman like herself.

"I said to shut up back there," she screeched, "If I have to come back there….I'm bringing the fly flap. And then I'll give you something to cry about."

For a second, she thought she saw movement out of the corner of her eye. It looked like something walked by the window. She half expected it to be that woman…coming back to start trouble. But nobody

came knocking on the door. Plus, it was dark outside now, and she didn't think that little Miss Priss would want to be tramping about in the dark. She might trip on one of her high-heels and break her neck.

Brenda chuckled at the thought and turned her eyes back to the television. Two women in wedding dresses were fighting it out over some little midget that was dressed in women's underwear. God…she loved the Jerry Springer show. And at least the brat had stopped crying.

***

In the back, seven year old Andrew Jones had stopped his crying. He couldn't remember too much about what had happened outside. He had been playing in the yard…staying out of Mommy's way. She was always telling him to get out of her hair…to go outside…to get out of the way. So…he had been digging little holes in the dirt outside when he had heard….a whisper….a voice…calling to him.

At first, it had sounded like Mommy's voice….but much sweeter. Then it sounded like his teacher's voice. But there had been another sound underneath that…a grating sound….like dirt underneath your shoe. It had hurt his ears a little. But the voice had kept calling him….to come…to….he couldn't remember. Had he wanted to go to the old barn that was in the field across the road? He just couldn't remember.

But none of that mattered right now. Right now…all that he could focus on was the television. He had been crying…trying to be quiet so that he didn't disturb Mommy. He didn't want her coming back with the fly flap again…or worse…the belt. His favorite

cartoon, Spiderman, had been on…and he had been watching it.

He just wanted to forget that….***voice***….that grating sound. He couldn't hear it anymore…but he still felt like he wanted to go to the barn….to run to the barn. There was something good in that barn…he just knew it. Maybe Daddy! But right now….he just wanted to watch Spiderman.

Only…it wasn't Spiderman on the TV. It was a commercial for cinnamon buns….and the Pillsbury Dough Boy was on the screen. But it wasn't just a commercial anymore. The Pillsbury Dough Boy was looking at….at him! He was talking to him. Andrew sat..amazed.

"Andrew," the Pillsbury Dough Boy was pointing at him now, "Listen to me. I need you listen to me and do exactly what I'm telling you. You've got to hurry though!"

Andrew sat…and listened…as the Pillsbury Dough Boy gave him some quick instructions.

***

Up front, Brenda threw the empty Variety Pizza box in the floor. She would pick it up later. Right now, she wanted to catch the end of the Jerry Springer special that she was loving so much. The two women had stopped fighting and had decided that they would **both** live with the midget. Some people were really messed up.

Those people are real freaks, she smirked, *Not normal like me.*

She saw something moving out of the corner of her eye again. She glanced over to the window. There in the dark glass she could see the face of her husband.

He was just standing there…staring at her. She was shocked at first because she hadn't seen him in three years. Slowly though, she felt herself beginning to get mad.

How long has he been standing there?

Did that low-life think that he could just waltz back into her life after being gone with that blonde for the last three years? And what kind of man just stands around outside and peers into people's windows? She looked again just to make sure that it was him. She saw his face…looking white and haggard. Why was he just standing there? He turned like he was going to walk away.

"Oh no you don't," she growled, jumping up off the couch. She was going to love this! She had been waiting three long years to give that man a piece of her mind.

"I don't know what you think…" she started to say as she threw open the door of the trailer. But she never got to finish. Her husband walked up to the door. For a second, she saw her husband standing there….still staring at her. And then he started to melt…to change….into something so hideous that she couldn't find the breath to scream. It was the last thing that she saw before the creature burrowed its chomping jaws into her massive guts.

Brenda let out a scream that sounded more like a gurgle. Blood erupted from her mouth and coursed down her muumuu…turning it from a purple to a dark black. Her eyes rolled back in her head as the pain washed over her like a curtain of fire. She staggered back into the wall of the trailer, dragging the creature inside with her. It still had its head buried in her stomach…as it continued to feed.

She tried to fight it off. Her hands beat weakly at its head but only met a hard shell. The world started to turn hazy. Little black blooms sprang up before her eyes.

Brenda let out a little moan….blood pouring from her mouth and nose. She slowly sank to the floor….her fat jiggling. She was dead by the time she hit the floor. The only sounds were the sounds of chewing, slurping, and the breaking of bones.

The creature stopped to lift its head from the massive hole it had made in the woman's guts. Blood dripped, dark and thick, from its maw. It sniffed the air…searching for the boy.

With a roar it sprang up and ran to the back of the trailer. It pushed down the door to the back bedroom…looking for the prey that had evaded it earlier. But it knew before it got there that the boy was gone. The bedroom window was open. There was a faint smell of cinnamon in the air. With a scream of fury, the creature sprang through the window. It would not let the boy escape! Not this time!

***

Her tires crunching on the gravel-lined dirt road, Ruby pulled off of Hwy. 476 and onto Miller Fork Road. It had taken her longer than usual to get here. She had been driving slowly ever since she had almost hit that kid who was playing in the road a few miles back.

What was with that kid anyway? she thought to herself.

He had acted like he was a little out of it…or maybe he was just slow. God knew that there were enough drug babies in this county. Of course, with a mother like his, maybe he was just afraid to do or say

anything. Ruby was still seething at the encounter with the old cow.

The view of Gran's old house in the distance made all of her troubles melt away though. In the low light of dusk, she could just barely make it out. But there was no mistaking that old white, two-story farmhouse for anything else but the home of her childhood. She had spent many years coming here…visiting Gran in the summers, helping gather eggs, hoeing weeds out of the garden, wading in the creek. She treasured those memories.

When did the world get so complicated?

But it was darker than she had thought it would be. Flipping on her headlights, she glanced at her clock and was surprised to see that it was already 8:45. She had to be at work by 10! She wasn't working a full shift tonight, but she had promised Hank, the owner, that she would come in and close. That meant that she would only have time for quick visit with Gran…maybe 45 minutes. At least she could check up on her and give her those groceries…and the moonshine.

She quickly pulled into the driveway and honked her horn three times. It was her special signal that she always did when she visited Gran…to let her know who she was. It was silly…she knew that Gran could just look out the window and see her car. But it was just a little tradition that they had started many years ago when Ruby had first learned to drive. Some things die hard.

Ruby grabbed the groceries and alcohol and started walking up the stone walkway to Gran's side porch. She noticed again how dark the house looked. Usually Gran would have a few lights on. She wasn't much for the dark. But Ruby noticed that there weren't

any lights at all burning in the house. She hoped that nothing was wrong. Concern made her steps quicken.

Walking up on the side porch, Ruby set the supplies down and knocked on the door. She couldn't hear anyone rustling around inside the house. There wasn't any television on or anything as far as she could hear. That wasn't like Gran. She knocked again. Nothing.

"Gran?" she asked, trying the knob. It turned easily in her hand. The door swung open. Inside, the house was as dark as a tomb. The heat rushed out at her. Apparently, Gran hadn't been using her air-conditioner either. Fear stabbed at her heart. She hoped that nothing was wrong.

Stop thinking the worst, she chided herself. But still…Gran was old.

"Gran?" she cried out, walking into the house. She tried the light switch but nothing happened. Taking her cigarette lighter out of her purse, she clicked on a little light. The hallway was empty. The flickering light didn't really help things all that much as she made her way toward the kitchen. It was light…that was true. But the flame just made things seem more surreal…more eerie.

Just then, she heard something shuffling behind her. A hand fell on her shoulder. She let out a scream and dropped the lighter. The room went black. Ruby let out another scream as she felt the hand clawing at her shoulder. The room was dark…not pitch black, but dark enough so that she couldn't see much of anything. Why had she dropped that dang lighter?

"Ruby?" came a voice that she instantly recognized.

"Gran!" she felt her shoulder. It was her Grandmother's hand there…of course.

"What's going on?" she continued, clutching Gran's hand, "What are you doing here in the dark?"

"The power went out honey," Gran said, flicking on a flashlight that cast a sharp, cold beam along the wooden floor of her house, "I was just down in the basement looking for this old flashlight. I really should keep one upstairs in case of this. I thought that I was going to fall down and break my fool neck!"

Ruby took the flashlight and walked with Gran into the kitchen. It was a little cooler in here because Gran had the windows open to let in a little breeze…but it wasn't helping out much.

"Power's been going off a lot here lately," Gran said, "If it keeps going off like this, pretty soon the electric company is gonna' owe ME money."

She laughed in the slow gentle way that she had. It made Ruby feel good to hear her Gran laugh. There was something about it that soothed her…reminded her of when she was a little girl. She had spent so much time with Gran as a girl. Those had been special times. Magical times.

"Let me see if I can find some of those old candles of mine," Gran opened up some cabinets and started rustling around inside of them. Soon, the kitchen was filled with the soft, warm glow that only candles can give. The flashlight was turned off…to save the battery for future emergencies.

"Lord knows that I'm happy to see you Ruby," Gran said, pouring them both a tall glass of iced tea from a round glass pitcher that she took from her darkened refrigerator, "But child…what in the world are you doing here so late at night?"

"Well…." Ruby began, hesitating. She wanted to burst right into how she was feeling…how Joe was ignoring her….how she wanted to call him…how she

wanted him to call her. But she didn't want to feel needy.

"Let me guess," Gran began, taking a small sip of her tea and nodding to herself at the taste, "Man trouble…again."

"Oh Gran!" Ruby cried out, "It's Joe."

"Joe Neace?" Gran asked, "Old man Harlan Neace's boy? You got an eye for him girl?"

"We went out on a date," Ruby began…and then it all came spilling out. She couldn't hold back any longer….and really this was why she had wanted to visit Gran in the first place. She needed to vent. She told Gran all about Tabitha Fraley running off with her boyfriend, the extra hours at work, and her love life….or lack of it. Why hadn't Joe called her back?

"Now listen honey," Gran said after listening to Ruby rattle on for a good 10 minutes, "It seems that life is dealing you a hard hand right now. You've just got to be patient and wait it out. The cards will turn…the cards will turn. They always do."

Ruby muttered the words to herself, "The cards will turn." It was one of Gran's favorite sayings. Ruby could remember her saying it for years and years. Even when Ruby was a child, that had been Gran's pat answer for everything. The cards will turn.

Ruby wasn't too soothed by Gran's reply, but really what else could she expect? It wasn't like Gran was running around with a bunch of boyfriends. She just didn't understand. Oh well…there was no need to rehash this again. She needed to get to work. She hated to leave Gran in the dark…but at least Gran would have supplies and…..

"Hey Gran!" Ruby smiled, holding up the clear Mason jar, "I brought you a little treat."

"Shine?" Gran acted shocked, "Why child…you know that I don't drink. But I will take it…for medicinal purposes you understand. It helps to have a little shine in the house you know."

"Oh, of course," Ruby smiled, knowing that Gran would pour herself a huge slug of the corn liquor as soon as Ruby left. But when you got to be as old as Gran, what could it hurt?

Ruby was just getting ready to tell Gran that she had to leave….had to get to work in order to close down the bar, when there came a loud and frantic scream from outside. Both women looked at each other in shock.

"What in God's name was that?" Ruby whispered.

"I don't know honey," Gran whispered back, "But it sounded scared…or in pain. Go upstairs and get my gun!"

Ruby sat listening again for a few minutes. The scream sounded again. It was closer now….and sounded like it was coming from the woods right outside Gran's house. There was also another sound….a roaring type of sound. It was hard to describe.

"RUBY!" Gran yelled out, "Go and get my gun girl….something's not right out there. Can't you feel it?"

And she could. The air…once stale and hot…had turned ice cold. Shivering, she hopped up and ran upstairs, taking the flashlight with her. She ran to Gran's bedroom. The pistol was there…where it always was…in Gran's bedstand. It was loaded and ready to go. Running back downstairs, she clutched the gun tightly.

"I've got it Gran," she said, running back into the kitchen, "Let's just wait and see if we hear that sound again."

Gran was gone.

***

The darkness seemed alive. Forgoing the natural laws, the blackness of night seemed to stretch out its claws….to snatch…to entangle…to trip up the stumbling little boy as he ran frantically in a mad panic from the creature which was pursuing him. Andrew Jones was running for his life.

Back in his room, he had been watching TV. He had just wanted to watch some cartoons until Mommy calmed down. Maybe she would have even saved him a piece of pizza if he was good. But then it had all changed. The Pillsbury Doughboy had popped up on his TV and had told him to run.

"Follow the creek!" the little white man had said, "Go now…and don't look back."

Andrew had jumped out of his bedroom window in the back of the trailer. Scrambling down to Troublesome Creek, he had started running along the edge. He had to get away. He didn't really know what he was running from, but he knew that it was bad.

"Andrew!" a voice called out behind him.

Not obeying the orders of the Pillsbury Doughboy, Andrew stopped and spun around. He saw Mommy quite a bit behind him, standing beside the creek. She looked mad. He gulped.

"Andrew!" his Mommy called again, "Get your behind back here right now! Just where do you think you're going?"

And he was going to go back. He didn't want to upset Mommy. That only brought the belt…or the back of her hand. He took a step toward her.

"No Andrew!" a voice called from across the creek, "Don't listen! That isn't your Mommy."

Andrew looked across the creek. There, on the other side was the Pillsbury Doughboy. He was dancing around, just like he did on those TV commercials.

"Look again!" the Doughboy called.

Andrew looked back at Mommy. But then he wished that he hadn't. His Mommy had a huge hole in her stomach. Her guts were falling out of the hole and dragging on the ground beside of her. There was blood running out of her mouth and down the front of her dress. One of her eyes had rolled up in her head, but the other one was staring at him with stony coldness. She was holding a belt.

"Get your little butt over here right now," the Mommy creature croaked, "Come here and get your punishment. It won't be too bad if you come right now."

But now, Andrew could see that this thing wasn't really his Mommy. A whimper escaped his little lips. He could feel the warmth in his pants as he wet himself. He started to tremble.

"Andrew!" the Doughboy was calling to him again, "Swim across the river. The creature can't cross running water."

Andrew looked down at the creek. Troublesome was running fast. The muddy waters looked greedy…hungry for little boy flesh. He looked back up at the Mommy creature. It was running toward him. Andrew saw that it had grown long black claws on the ends of its hands.

"Don't move Andrew!" the Mommy creature growled, "I'm almost there! Don't move darling. Mommy wants to give you a hug! A kiss!"

"Andrew!" the Doughboy called, "Move it! If you don't come now…it will be too late!"

Without thinking about the water…the cold….the danger…Andrew plunged into the creek. He was able to half swim…half walk across the muddy river. Behind him he could hear a shriek of pain and rage. He didn't turn back.

When he was across the creek, he stood there trembling with fear and cold. He look behind him, half expecting the Mommy creature to be there…grinning and dripping with blood. But it was gone.

"Now Andrew," came the voice of the Doughboy from all around him, "Run!"

Letting out a scream, Andrew started to run toward a house that he saw in the distance. He kept screaming.

***

Deep black anger rolled through the shadow's mind as it raced along the banks of Troublesome Creek. Things had been going so well. It had fed on the adult female…drinking in the greed and laziness of her life force and giving it new purpose.

The child would have been next. His was a special gift…and the creature longed to devour that power and take control of it. Even the boy was not aware of his talents.

But then the white elf had interfered. It wasn't the first time that the power of White had messed with the shadow's plans. There had been that incident with the creature in the woods…the Dar-koth. But that had

been in another time…another life. Someone else's tale had been told.

The shadow focused its mind on the one thing that it knew…pain. There was always the pain. The pain of the rage and anger it felt out of being cheated from its prize. The pain of hunger. Even pleasure felt like pain. Pain was the one constant in its life. And now, there was the pain of crystal clarity…focusing on finding a way across the flowing water which blocked it from its prey. Ahead, it could see the outline of what it had been searching for…a bridge.

With a howl of victory, the creature sped across the bridge. How had the white elf known that it could not cross running water? The boy's scent had been so heavy in its nostrils that it could practically taste his life's blood. And then it had all been taken away.

The boy had crossed Troublesome Creek. But he wouldn't get away….not for long. With a swiftness that is often seen in creatures of the night, the shadow sped along on the other side of the swift waters. It sensed a victory. It was already picking up the scent of the boy once more. Not even the white elf could protect him for much longer. Not forever.

As the creature ran along, snuffling at the ground, it began to tremble. The pain was increasing. There was only one hope of dulling the pain…making it more of a pleasurable sensation.

The boy had to die.

***

A sharp howl and another cry of fear and pain rang out. Alarmed, Ruby gripped the pistol which she had taken from her Grandmother's nightstand and then stepped outside. With the power being out, the night

took on a whole new meaning. The darkness was so thick that it felt as though she could drown in it.

"Gran?" she hissed, "Are you out here?"

At first there was no answer. The only sound that Ruby could hear was the sound of her own fearful, labored breathing. She felt the hot sweat of panic begin to run down her face and into her open, panting mouth. The bitterness of her own body flooded her senses. Where was her grandmother?

She could hear something running in the woods. It sounded like it was coming closer. Someone screamed. It almost sounded like a child.

"GRAN!" she cried out, "Where are you?"

"Hush child," came the sound of her Gran's voice….from right beside her, "I'm right here. Do you hear that?"

"Yes Gran," Ruby said, relieved to find her Gran once again, "I have your pistol. Want me to shoot out into the woods? Maybe it is a wildcat or something.…I can scare it away."

"No Ruby," Gran said, "Hold off on the shooting. That isn't a cat….wild or otherwise. I think that it is a child. Listen."

Ruby listened. The scream came again. Yes, now that Gran had pointed it out, it did seem to be a child's voice. It was getting closer and closer.

With a faint click, the light from the flashlight that Gran was holding pierced the air with a stabbing light. She quickly fanned the area, searching for the source of the sound. And then, they both saw him. A little boy came bursting out of the woods. His arms were flailing wildly and his face was a living white sheet. He didn't even try to slow down…he just kept running.

Handing the pistol to her Gran, Ruby ran out to meet the boy. He wasn't going to stop.…Ruby saw that.

So instead, she reached out and grabbed him. He was a collection of wild energy in her arms. Struggling with her, he tried to get away. He kept clawing at her. Pinching her. Biting at her. Plus, he was soaking wet!

"Hey….hey now," Ruby was trying to calm the kid down, "What's wrong? Is someone after you? Are you okay?"

The boy didn't answer. He seemed to be in shock. All he tried to do was keep running.

"Ruby?" her Gran was talking to her, shining the light back into the woods.

Ruby was struggling to keep the boy still….trying to keep him from running off again. He kept screaming and screaming.

"What is it Gran?" Ruby puffed as she managed to get kicked in the shins by the boy's size 7's.

"There's something else out there," Gran was saying, "And it's coming this way!"

Ruby looked up in time to sense rather than directly see a shadow moving among the trees.

"I think that we had better get back inside," was all that she managed to say….turning to run with the boy and nudge her Gran along.

That was when the bellow of rage rang out behind her.

***

Sometimes in the most desperate of times, even the soul of the most cold-hearted person will cry out to God in a thin hope of salvation. Ruby hadn't always been the most devout church-going woman, but she wasn't a complete skank either. Working at a bar, she saw some pretty horrible lowlifes. She saw the ugliness in mankind. But then again, she saw some wonderful

people as well. She knew that there was always hope. Except now…she wasn't so sure.

The house enveloped all three people in a shroud of heat and darkness. Ruby was still clutching the boy to her, trying to keep him from running out the door and into the clutches of whatever was prowling in the night. The boy whimpered in her arms, his cries silenced but not completely stopped. Ruby was thankful that he had stopped clawing and pinching at her though.

She was going to be bruised like hell in the morning…if she was still alive. Beside her, she could hear Gran's labored breathing. She hoped that the old woman was doing okay. Fear can do a lot to a person…and Gran wasn't in the best of health to begin with.

She had been amazed to see that the boy was the same little boy that she had almost run down in the road. She thought about asking him what he was doing out by himself, but she thought better of it. She had a sinking feeling that his mom probably hadn't made it.

What is it about this boy? she thought, *Why is that thing after him?*

For a second, Ruby thought about pouring them all a shot of the corn liquor that she had brought to Gran earlier. God! That seemed like such a long time ago! Instead, she closed her eyes and prayed for spiritual alcohol to calm her nerves. She wasn't sure if God would even bother to listen to her…but she needed to talk. She needed a shot of His love.

"That's right child," Gran whispered beside her, "Pray…pray like you've never prayed before. Whatever that thing was out there was pure evil. I could feel it."

Ruby could feel it even now. The air had turned from the haze and heat of summer into the cold chill of

winter as the creature had closed in on them. They had all turned and ran into Gran's house, slamming the door behind them. Ruby didn't want to think about what would have happened if it had caught them…but she suspected that they would all be dead by now.

"Why doesn't it come in?" she questioned out loud.

"I don't know child," Gran's hand found her shoulder in the darkness, "I honestly don't know."

Ruby sat and listened some more. When they had first run into the house, she could still hear the creature snuffling around at the doors and windows. She had known that it would just burst through with a snarling tangle of claws and fangs…but it hadn't. And then, the sounds had quieted…and vanished.

"Do you think that it's gone child?" Gran asked beside her, "I don't hear it anymore."

"I don't hear it either Gran," Ruby whispered back, "But I don't think that it is gone. Can't you feel that?"

The air still held some of the unnatural chill. It felt cold and clammy against Ruby's skin…like the touch of the dead.

Just then, she heard a voice call out from outside. It was a voice that she instantly recognized. It was a voice that she had been dying to hear for a few days now….it was Joe Neace.

"Ruby?" Joe called out, "You all in there? Are you all right?"

Ruby's heart started beating wildly. How had Joe found them here?

"Joe?" she cried out, "Is that you?"

"Yeah," he called back, "I was out this way and I saw your car. The power lines are down and I thought

that I would check on you all. This dang power is out all the way to town!"

"JOE!" Ruby screamed, running toward the door, "There is something out there! Do you see anything?"

"Bless that boy's heart for coming all the way out here," Gran's voice shook with emotion from behind her.

"No," Joe's voice rang out, "I don't see a thing. Of course, it's so dark out here that I can't see much of anything. Can I come inside?"

Ruby was just about to invite Joe to come on in when she felt the boy run up behind her. She reached out to grab him, thinking that he was going to run out the door. Instead, he ran into her arms and grabbed hold of her head.

"NO!" the boy shouted, "Don't invite it in! It can't come in unless you invite it in! If you do….we'll all die!!!"

Ruby was shocked. What was the kid saying? He sounded like a crazy person. At first, she thought about just telling him to hush up. She would invite Joe in anyway. She knew that it sounded awful, but she wanted to have a man around. It was some sort of primal thing.

So much for women's lib, she thought.

"Ruby honey," Joe's voice called out again, "Is everything okay? Can I come on in?"

And then she could feel it. The coldness had returned. She could sense it….standing and trembling right outside the door. She had been so excited about hearing Joe's voice that she had been ignoring it. But now she could feel it. And she knew. What she had been talking to wasn't Joe.

Oh my God! What was I about to invite into the house?

And then the voice changed. It was no longer Joe's reassuring voice speaking to them now. It was something much darker…full of pain and anger.

"You're all going to die," it screamed out in agony, "And your death will be painful and long. And I'm going to start with you Ruby. I'll save the boy for desert."

Screams rang out in the darkness. It took Ruby a second to realize that the screaming was her own. Ruby sat, dazed in the darkness of Gran's house. Mostly for comfort, she had wrapped her arms around herself and had started rocking back and forth. She quickly stopped.

"There's no use in going completely crazy," she muttered to herself. She had a vision of herself in the loony bin, screaming and sitting in a puddle of her own urine. Maybe she was there already…and just didn't know it. Maybe that would be better. She smirked.

With that….***thing***….outside, they all needed their wits. She shuddered as she thought about how close she had come to letting the creature into the house. But it had sounded just like Joe. God…she wished that he were here right now! How had the monster even known what she was thinking? Could it read her thoughts?

"Well, read this!" she gritted her teeth together while thinking some of the most horrible thoughts that she could. But then she quickly ceased. What if the thing fed on bad thoughts? God! She was so confused.

***

It had been several hours since they had first ran into the house, locking the creature outside. Everything was quiet now, but Ruby could tell that it was not safe.

She could still sense the evilness of the creature as it circled the house.

Gran was lying down on her couch, trying to get some sleep. The boy was asleep in Gran's old blue recliner. Usually, Ruby would have been stretched out in it herself, but she couldn't think of anything but that dark shadow. She hadn't heard anything from it in over an hour…none of them had. But she knew that it was still out there. She could feel it.

She heard Gran shift on the couch, the sound of rustling cloth filling the darkness. She felt so sorry for the old woman. What if the stress of all this got to her? What if she had a heart attack? She prayed for strength…not knowing if God was even listening. But it was just too much for her. Whenever she tried to think about what was going on, her head would start to ache.

But the good thing was that the creature had not tried to break into the house. According to the boy, it couldn't come in…unless it was invited.

How did he know that?

Maybe they could just wait until the morning. Would daylight drive it away? She prayed that it would. But how long would it be before the dawn?

***

Asleep in the recliner, Andrew Jones was unaware of what was going on around him. In his dreams, he was walking in a brightly lit meadow. Mommy was walking beside him. She was talking to him. He knew that Mommy was dead…that he would never see her again…and he started to cry.

"Hush now baby," Mommy said, rubbing his tears away with her hand. She was much prettier in his dream than she had ever been in real life. She looked

at him with eyes that seemed to be happy and sad at the same time.

"Now listen to me Andrew," Mommy was saying again, "I don't have much time. That thing outside the house won't stop until you are dead. It won't wait much longer, baby. It has been searching all around the house to find a way in. And it is going to find a way in very soon."

"But the little white man said that it couldn't come in unless it was invited," Andrew said crossly. He didn't want to hear what Mommy was saying. Why didn't she just tell him that everything was going to be okay? Isn't that what she was supposed to do?

"I know honey," Mommy said, "And usually it couldn't. It can't come in through windows or doors or anything like that unless it is invited. But it is sneaky…it will find a way. And it is strong!"

And then the Pillsbury Dough Boy was with him again, standing beside Mommy in the field. The day wasn't as sunny as it had been. Dark clouds had started to roll overhead. Mommy was whispering in his ear….telling him what he had to do. He looked over at the Pillsbury Dough Boy. The little white man had started to cry….and his tears were red…like blood. Andrew kept listening….but he was crying also. He was a good boy….and he didn't want to do what Mommy was telling him that he had to do. She was telling him something very important….and it was about the woman that he had run into.

"Her name is Ruby," Mommy said. And then she told him what he needed to do.

***

She was young again. Looking in a mirror, she gave a little yelp of pleasure to see that the wrinkles were gone…the gray in her hair had vanished. Instead, there was the visage of youth staring back at her. She reached up to feel the smoothness of her skin….the fullness of her lips….her bosom.

"Grace?" came a voice that she hadn't heard in years…a strong, young, masculine voice.

Twirling around on legs that felt as light as air (and why shouldn't they….they were young, strong legs), she saw Tom….her darling husband. Only…he wasn't her husband yet. They wouldn't be married for at least 6 more months. He was staring at her through the open window….grinning in that mischievous way that made her heart flutter and her knees shake.

"Tom!" she mock scolded, "What are you doing out there? If my daddy catches you sneaking around here…."

"You're home all alone," Tom grinned, a summer breeze blowing in the intoxicating scent of him toward her. God….she loved how he smelled.

"So?" Tom asked.

"What?" she replied, knowing what he was going to ask before he asked it.

He would want to come in. They could steal a few kisses and hugs before her parents came home. It would be nice. It would be so nice to have Tom in her arms again.

"Can I come in?" Tom was leaning toward her. And she wanted him to come in. She wanted him to take her in his arms and kiss her. And before she could even think about it, she invited him.

"Come on in big boy," she smiled.

But as the door knob started to turn, she knew that something was wrong. Tom had been dead now for

7 years. And she wasn't young anymore. She looked in the mirror…and saw that old age had once again settled onto her face.

And still the door knob turned.

***

Ruby sat in the darkness, waiting for the light of dawn. Surely they would be safe then…they could escape from this living hell and get to town. Maybe things would turn out alright.

From across the room, she heard the low moan of the boy as he slept. It sounded like he was having a bad dream…but then again, who could blame him. And then…she heard Gran sigh out in her sleep.

And her heart froze as she heard Gran's voice whisper in the darkness, "Come on in big boy."

What had Gran just done? Who…or what…had she invited into the house? But she knew the answer. Downstairs, in the basement, she heard the creak of the hinges. A door was being opened….slowly. Something was in the house!

Ruby's breath caught in her throat. She had heard Gran's whispered invitation…muttered in some dream perhaps but an invitation none-the-less. The air around her took on a chill as she heard the creak of the hinges of the old door in Gran's basement. The thing was in the house. What in the world was she going to do now?

Something touched her arm, and she jumped, screaming. She quickly checked herself. Turning the flashlight on, she saw that it was the little boy. He was standing there, still and pale. Oh God! What was she going to do with the boy? That thing in the basement was in the house….and she had no idea what she was

going to do. To make matters worse, Gran had just woken up. And she knew what she had done, it seemed.

"Oh Ruby," Gran's voice wavered with emotion, "I think I've done something bad."

"Hush now," Ruby whispered, "Let's try to stay quiet."

"That won't help," the boy said, his voice cold and strangely calm. He really gave Ruby the creeps. She looked at him in the harsh beam of the flashlight. His eyes seemed far away…almost vacant.

Gran started to cry a little bit louder. Ruby suddenly felt like she should just make a run for it. The thing wanted the boy. It would take him first. And Gran was old…she couldn't run that fast. That would surely give her time to get the hell out of here and to somewhere safe…somewhere far away from the horror that was slowly creeping closer and closer to them. She could feel it coming closer…toying with them. The air around them was getting colder….colder….and it began to take on an acrid smell. Like an old diaper.

Let it kill them, she thought, *At least I'll be safe.*

And then she realized with horror at what she was thinking! It wasn't like her to think like that! It must be the evil of the creature…getting to her.

Of course she couldn't…wouldn't…leave the boy or Gran behind. She would stay and fight. To the end if need be. She still had Gran's pistol. She reached for it. It felt heavy and reassuring in her hand.

"That won't do you any good," the boy said again, slowly and dreamily….like he was talking in his sleep.

It was all Ruby could do to keep from snapping at the boy….slapping him across the face. Anything to get a reaction other than that dazed, hypnotized look would be better!

"Here…take this," he reached out his hand. He was holding something small and pointed. It flashed a bright blue in the light-beam.

"What?" Ruby asked, taking the object. It flashed blue again….surely it was just the light. But it almost looked as though the light was coming from inside the object itself. Now she could see….it was a bullet!

"Where did you get this?" Ruby asked, holding it in her palm. It looked cold….flashing blue in the darkness. But it felt warm. It was almost as though it was pulsing in her hand.

Like it's alive! she thought.

"Mommy gave it to me," the boy said, walking back toward the recliner where he had been sleeping only moments before, "She is with the little white man….the one from the TV. She said to give that to you. You have to kill the monster."

"WHAT?!?" Ruby asked, jumping up. Downstairs, she could hear the shuffling of feet across the laminate flooring that Gran had put down a few years ago. It sounded like nails….claws…skittering across. What in the world was that thing?

"Goodnight," the boy whispered, falling down onto the recliner. He was fast asleep again before his head hit the back of the chair.

Had he even been awake?

Ruby stared back down at her palm. The bullet glowed again…flashing a bright blue that sent a shock of heat up her arm. She looked over at Gran…but the old woman was a mess. She was shaking and crying.

"All my fault," Gran was muttering, "I let it in. I let it in."

"Gran….for God's sake," Ruby suddenly cried out, "Just please….please don't. I don't know what to do. What should I do?"

Gran looked at her….her face a mask of fear and tears. Ruby's heart skipped a beat. She had always known Gran to be her rock. The one person on whom she could always count. Now…Gran looked like some wild animal caught in a trap. It hurt Ruby's eyes to see Gran in this way.

Without even thinking about it, she opened the pistol and slid the bullet into one of the chambers. It fit perfectly. Just like it was made for it, she thought. Somehow, she knew that it would have fit any gun…any weapon that she had. Suddenly the entire pistol felt alive. It was vibrating in her hand. A strange calmness came over her.

She must have shown it on her face because Gran suddenly seemed to calm down a little as well. She snuffed….looking at Ruby in the dim light of the flashlight.

"Ruby, what are you doing?" Gran whispered, as Ruby walked slowly toward the door which led to the basement, "Where are you going?"

"I think you know that already Gran," Ruby said, "Lock the door behind me. And if you hear me…screaming…get out of the house. Take the boy with you. Just run."

"RUBY NO!" Gran was off the couch and running toward her, "DON"T GO DOWN THERE!"

"I have to Gran!" Ruby looked at Gran, "I have to! But don't worry….I think….I think that maybe I have a chance now."

"Why?" Gran was pulling on her arm, trying to make her stay, "Because of some shiny piece of metal that the boy had. He could have found that anywhere. You're going to get yourself killed."

"NO GRAN!" Ruby pulled her arm away, "If I don't go…we are all going to die."

And Gran knew. She must have sensed it. Ruby could tell. Ruby saw her slowly lower her arms and nod…just once.

Slowly, Ruby opened the basement door, expecting the thing to jump out…and leap toward her throat. But it didn't. The flashlight in her hand shook slightly.

The stairs were empty. Taking a step forward, Ruby walked through the door and shut it behind her. She heard the click as Gran locked it behind her.

She was alone…in the basement…at the top of the stairs….with that thing down below somewhere. Suddenly she didn't feel quite so courageous. And then the flashlight went out. She was alone…in the dark. And she could hear something breathing right in front of her.

***

A voice yelled out, breaking the silence.

"Ruby!"

She looked up at the sharp voice, her mind whirling as people darted all around her. It was her boss…Ted Andrews. He was standing behind the bar…and not looking too happy at that. She looked around at the confusion of people, staggering around in their own little drunken world. She was at work!

"Are you going to put that phone down and get to work," Ted asked her, wiping the fingerprints off of a glass before filling it with the cheap beer he kept on tap that brought in all the local alcoholics, "I'm not paying you to just stand around."

"Ss..ss..sorry," she stammered, shaking her head. Hadn't she just been somewhere else? She could have sworn that she was at Gran's. Or had she just been

thinking about going to Gran's? And why was she holding her cell phone? Who was she calling?

"Hey Ruby!" a friendly voice called out to her.

She turned and was pleased to see Joe waving to her from his usual place at the pool table in the back. She smiled…still a little confused. She was pleased to see Joe. But something wasn't right. She just couldn't put her finger on it.

Walking over to Joe, she shook her head. She seemed like she was in a fog. She tried to focus on the people moving around her, but they seemed to be going in fast forward while she was stuck in slow motion. So instead, she focused on Joe. He smiled and waved her on over.

"Hey Joe," she leaned in for a quick kiss, looking back toward Ted. He didn't like her to get too friendly with the customers while she was working. Ted was still hard at work….cleaning another glass of fingerprints.

"Where've you been girl?" Joe asked her, leaning over and knocking a ball into the far pocket. He was so good at this game! She herself was just a clumsy oaf when it came to pool…but she loved to watch Joe when he played.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I've been waiting for you all night," Joe asked, "I was gettin' lonely. Why don't you put down that phone you're holding and we can play a little pool."

"I…I can't Joe," she said, "I'm working right now. Ted would kill me if I just took a break….especially now. This place is packed. I really need to get back to work. I'll talk to you later though…okay?"

Joe nodded and leaned over to make his next play. He didn't say anything else. Ruby thought it was rather odd. She walked back over to the bar. People

were still buzzing wildly around her. She tried to see if anyone needed drinks, but she couldn't quite make out anyone's face. It was almost as if everyone was standing in the shadows. She saw that Ted was still cleaning glasses. How many dang glasses did he have to clean anyway?

He looked up at her and scowled.

"I thought that I said that you needed to get to work," he growled, "Put that snake down and get some drink orders!"

Snake? Ruby looked down and gasped with horror. Instead of a phone, she was holding a wriggling, squirming rattlesnake! It was hissing and spitting and striking at her arm. She let out a scream and almost dropped it…but something in the back of her mind suddenly kicked in.

Don't let go of that thing, girl….or you are as good as dead!

"RUBY!" a voice bellowed from the back.

She turned. There was Joe again. Only this time he wasn't smiling and playing pool. This time….he was crouched on top of the pool table. Instead of a cue, he was holding a ball. Only it wasn't a ball at all….it was a human head. With a howl, Joe threw the head toward her. It landed on the floor at her feet.

With a low moan, Ruby saw that the head was Gran's. As it came to rest at her feet, the eyes flew open. They were staring right at her….burning with hate. Gran's mouth flew open and a shriek filled the air.

Ruby screamed and turned back to Ted. He was right behind her. His mouth opened….wider and wider until it seemed to split his head into two separate pieces. His tongue wagged wildly out of his mouth and

his hot, rancid breath hit her in the face. She gagged from the stench.

"I….SAID….TO….PUT….THAT….THING…..DOWN! PUT….IT…DOWN….NOW!" he yelled.

***

Practice makes perfect. It is a cliché, but everyone knows that it is the truth. When the body or mind is placed in times of trial, it is the practice that allows it to work without thinking….do without knowing.

When Ruby had turned 12, her father had insisted that she learn how to shoot a gun. Every day they had practiced with an old shotgun of his….setting up old cans and shooting them over. Every day, her aim would get a little better. Now….that practice would pay off.

As the vision around her melted, Ruby realized that she was still in Gran's basement. She had not been back at the bar. And she hadn't been speaking to her boss or to Joe. It was the creature. It had been trying to fool her…to trick her into putting down the one thing that could stop it…..the gun. Now, as the image of her boss melted away and the reality of the creature appeared before her, Ruby's body acted on its own.

Without thinking (because thinking was impossible when faced with the horror of the shadow), Ruby's arm flew up…making perfect aim. Without thinking (because she was screaming too loudly and too fiercely), Ruby's finger found the sweet spot that would make the bullet go exactly where it needed to travel. And for one brief moment, the air around her was filled with the scent of baking cinnamon buns….and was that

chocolate chip cookies? And then, with a flash, her finger pulled the trigger.

The creature had leapt toward her…fangs and claws exposed…thirsty for her blood. In that instant, a shot of blue fire erupted from the pistol and made its way across the room, lighting up the darkness. With a whoosh, the fire enveloped the creature in a cocoon of blue flame.

All along, the monster had been trying to get Ruby to drop the gun. All along, the shadow of evil had been trying to trick Ruby into letting go of her one hope. Now…with the power that it had held dispersed, the gun fell from her hand. A large metallic clank rang out…but it was drowned out from the screeches of the writhing horror. As Ruby stared in horror, the creature changed shape.

First, it was a large spider…fangs dripping with deadly poison. Then, it was a bat….its large, leathery wings burnt and ruined beyond the ability to fly. Then it was Joe….screaming and reaching toward her. She even saw herself….her hair burnt from her head…her eyes boiling in their sockets. And then, with one final surge of cold heat….the flames erupted into one brief bright flash. Ruby shielded her eyes.

When she was able to look again, the creature was gone….the fire was gone…and the danger was gone. Ruby felt wetness running down her face and was alarmed that she might be bleeding. She wiped at her cheeks….and realized….she was crying.

Seeing the darkness…..the true evil of the creature….had broken something inside of her. She knew that she would never be the same person again….but somehow she knew that it wasn't such a bad thing.

Still crying, she turned and headed back toward the darkness which led upstairs. The door creaked open and a familiar face appeared.

"Ruby?" Gran asked, "You okay down there darlin'? We heard an awful racket."

"Yes Gran," Ruby said, "It's fine….it's all going to be alright."

But will it, she thought, *Will anything ever be truly alright ever again?*

But **for now**, it was going to be alright….Ruby could feel it. But she also felt at the back of her mind that her world would never be "alright" again. She knew that she would never be able to walk into a dark room again….never be able to take a long walk in the woods by herself….and never be able to fully trust her own eyes again.

The world has changed.

And the boy. She didn't even want to think about what was going to happen to him. She knew that something bad had happened to his mom….she had gotten that much out of him.

But for the moment, she was safe…they were all safe. Though for how long…..how long before another creature of darkness came into her life…she didn't know. That she could not answer….all that she knew was that in that final flash of light before the creature of darkness had vanished, she had seen a vision.

In the flames there had been a strange sight indeed….the Pillsbury Dough Boy. He had been holding a picture…of the boy. His eyes had been bleeding. And he had only spoken two words.

Protect him!

And that was exactly what Ruby planned on doing. She reached the stairs and then suddenly turned. Without thinking…without speaking…she walked back across the basement floor. With one swoop, she reached down and grasped the pistol which was lying on the floor. She felt that she was going to need it…and soon.

The sun was starting to shine on a new day. And unlike all the other days before it, Ruby felt alive.

Scared Yet?

Learn more about author Alonzo Fugate and his first two books for children at his website,

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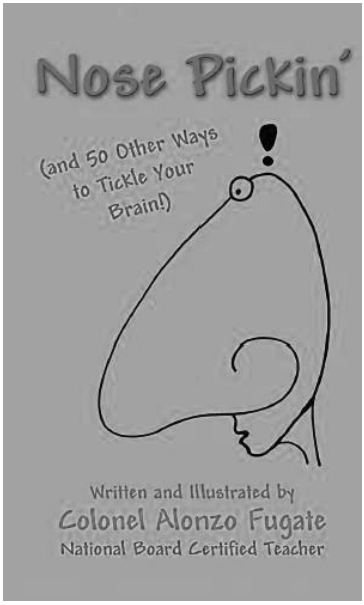
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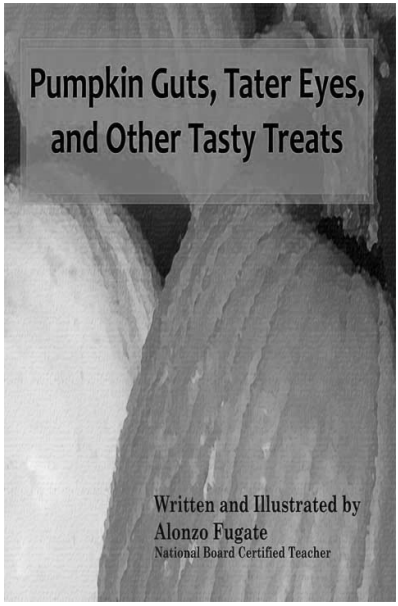
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